DIANA GABALDON

The LORD JOHN Series

Diana Gabaldon

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Lord John and the Private Matter

Lord John and the Hand of Devils

Lord John and the Brotherhood of the Blade

The Scottish Prisoner



Delacorte Press

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The novels contained in this omnibus were each published separately by Delacorte Press, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., in 2003, 2007, 2007, and 2011.

This book contains an excerpt from the forthcoming book *Written in My Own Heart's Blood* by Diana Gabaldon. This excerpt has been set for this edition only and may not reflect the final content of the forthcoming edition.

Cover design: Marietta Anastassatos

Cover photo: Shutterstock

eBook ISBN: 978-0-345-54603-6

www.bantamdell.com

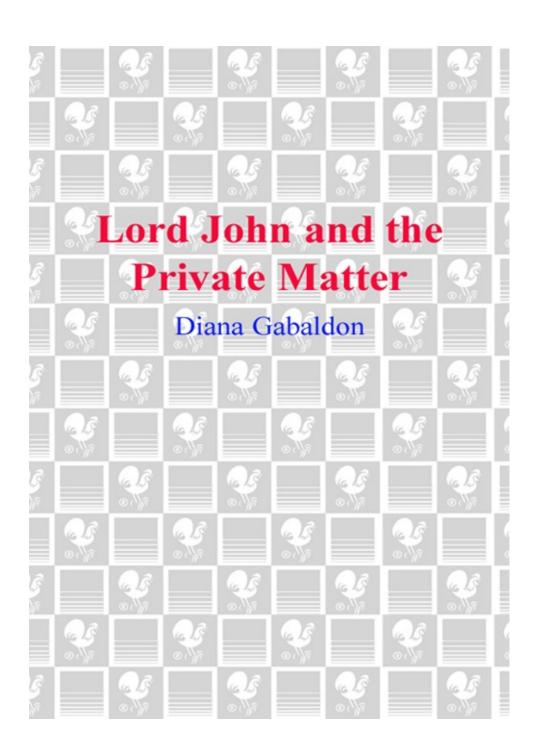
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Excerpt from Written in My Own Heart's Blood



Lord John and the Private Matter

Diana Gabaldon

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LORD JOHN AND THE PRIVATE MATTER A Delacorte Book / October 2003

Published by Bantam Dell A Division of Random House, Inc. New York, New York

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA Gabaldon, Diana.

Lord John and the private matter / Diana Gabaldon.

p. cm.

1. London (England)—History—18th century—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3557.A22L67 2003 813'.54—dc21 2003046276

Published simultaneously in Canada

eISBN: 978-0-440-33452-1 v3.0 r2

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Dear Readers—

I think it's only fair to warn you that I wrote this book by accident. I *thought* I was writing a short story about Lord John Grey—one of my favorite characters from the OUTLANDER novels. As it was, though ... Lord John had other ideas.

Even though I was working—and still am—on the next "big" novel starring Jamie and Claire, Lord John's adventures in London in 1757 kept evolving, growing more complex and fascinating with each page. Set during the time just after Lord John has left Jamie Fraser at Helwater as a Jacobite prisoner of war, *Lord John and the Private Matter* is an interpolation: part of the OUTLANDER series, and taking place within its timeline—but focused on an adventure separate from the lives of the main characters.

So I hope you will enjoy this trip through the darker side of London life in the company of Scottish whores, plumed Huns, reprobate Sergeants, Irish apothecaries, transvestite spies ... and Lord John.

Slainte mhath!

—Diana

P.S. If you've been reading the OUTLANDER novels, you probably already know that "Slainte mhath!" means "To your very good health!" in Gaelic, but I thought I'd mention it, just in case. (You normally say this while drinking whisky, but if you want to drink whisky while reading this book, I think that's fine, and I'm sure Lord John wouldn't mind, either.)



Chapter 1

When First We Practice to Deceive

London, June 1757 The Society for the Appreciation of the English Beefsteak, a Gentlemen's Club

It was the sort of thing one hopes momentarily that one has not really seen—because life would be so much more convenient if one hadn't.

The thing was scarcely shocking in itself; Lord John Grey had seen worse, could see worse now, merely by stepping out of the Beefsteak into the street. The flower girl who'd sold him a bunch of violets on his way into the club had had a half-healed gash on the back of her hand, crusted and oozing. The doorman, a veteran of the Americas, had a livid tomahawk scar that ran from hairline to jaw, bisecting the socket of a blinded eye. By contrast, the sore on the Honorable Joseph Trevelyan's privy member was quite small. Almost discreet.

"Not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a door," Grey muttered to himself. "But it will suffice. Damn it."

He emerged from behind the Chinese screen, lifting the violets to his nose. Their sweetness was no match for the pungent scent that followed him from the piss-pots. It was early June, and the Beefsteak, like every other establishment in London, reeked of beer and asparagus-pee.

Trevelyan had left the privacy of the Chinese screen before Lord John, unaware of the latter's discovery. The Honorable Joseph stood across the dining room now, deep in conversation with Lord Hanley and Mr. Pitt, the very picture of taste and sober elegance. Shallow in the chest, Grey thought uncharitably—though the suit of puce superfine was beautifully tailored to flatter the man's slenderness. Spindle-shanked, too; Trevelyan shifted weight, and a shadow winked on his left leg, where the pad of the downy-calf he wore had shifted under a clocked silk stocking.

Lord John turned the posy critically in his hand, as though inspecting it for wilt, watching the man from beneath lowered lashes. He knew well enough how to look without appearing to do so. He wished he were not in the habit of such surreptitious inspection—if not, he wouldn't now be facing this dilemma.

The discovery that an acquaintance suffered from the French disease would normally be grounds for nothing more than distaste at worst, disinterested sympathy at best—along with a heartfelt gratitude that one was not oneself so afflicted. Unfortunately, the Honorable Joseph Trevelyan was not merely a club acquaintance; he was betrothed to Grey's cousin.

The steward murmured something at his elbow; by reflex, he handed the posy to the man and flicked a hand in dismissal.

"No, I shan't dine yet. Colonel Quarry will be joining me."

"Very good, my lord."

Trevelyan had rejoined his companions at a table across the room, his narrow face flushed with laughter at some jest by Pitt.

Grey couldn't stand there glowering at the man; he hesitated, unsure whether to go across to the smoking room to wait for Quarry, or perhaps down the hall to the library. In the event, though, he was prevented by the sudden entry of Malcolm Stubbs, lieutenant of his own regiment, who hailed him with pleased surprise.

"Major Grey! What brings you here, eh? Thought you was quite the fixture at White's. Got tired of the politicals, have you?"

Stubbs was aptly named, no taller than Grey himself, but roughly twice as wide, with a broad cherubic face, wide blue eyes, and a breezy manner that endeared him to his troops, if not always to his senior officers.

"Hallo, Stubbs." Grey smiled, despite his inner disquiet. Stubbs was a casual friend, though their paths seldom crossed outside of regimental business. "No, you confuse me with my brother Hal. I leave the whiggery-pokery up to him."

Stubbs went pink in the face, and made small snorting noises.

"Whiggery-pokery! Oh, that's ripe, Grey, very ripe. Must remember to tell it to the Old One." The Old One was Stubbs's father, a minor baronet with distinct whiggish leanings, and likely a familiar of both White's Club and Lord John's brother.

"So, you a member here, Grey? Or a guest, like me?" Stubbs, recovering from his attack of mirth, waved a hand round the spacious confines of the white-naped dining room, casting an admiring glance at the impressive array of decanters being arranged by the steward at a sideboard.

"Member."

Trevelyan was nodding cordially to the Duke of Gloucester, who returned the salutation. Christ, Trevelyan really did know everyone. With a small effort, Grey returned his attention to Stubbs.

"My godfather enrolled me for the Beefsteak at my birth. Starting at the age of seven, which is when he assumed reason began, he brought me here every Wednesday for luncheon. Got out of the habit while abroad, of course, but I find myself coming back, whenever I'm in Town."

The wine steward was leaning down to offer Trevelyan a decanter of port; Grey recognized the embossed gold tag at its neck—San Isidro, a hundred guineas the cask. Rich, well-connected ... and infected. Damn, what was he going to do about this?

"Your host not here yet?" He touched Stubbs's elbow, turning him toward the door. "Come, then—let's have a quick one in the library."

They strolled down the pleasantly shabby carpet that lined the hall, chatting inconsequently.

"Why the fancy-dress?" Grey asked casually, flicking at the braid on Stubbs's shoulder. The Beefsteak wasn't a soldier's haunt; though a few officers of the regiment were members, they seldom wore full dress uniform here, save when on their way to some official business. Grey himself was only uniformed because he was meeting Quarry, who never wore anything else in public.

"Got to do a widow's walk later," Stubbs replied, looking resigned. "No time to go back for a change."

"Oh? Who's dead?" A widow's walk was an official visit, paid to the family of a recently deceased member of the regiment, to offer condolences and make inquiry as to the widow's welfare. In the case of an enlisted man, such a visit might include the handing over of a small amount of cash contributed by the man's intimates and immediate superiors—with luck, enough to bury him decently.

"Timothy O'Connell."

"Really? What happened?" O'Connell was a middle-aged Irishman,

surly but competent; a lifelong soldier who had risen to sergeant by dint of his ability to terrify subordinates—an ability Grey had envied as a seventeen-year-old subaltern, and still respected ten years later.

"Killed in a street brawl, night before last."

Grey's brows went up at that. "Must have been set on by a mob," he said, "or taken by surprise; I'd have given long odds on O'Connell in a fight that was even halfway fair."

"Didn't hear any details; I'm meant to ask the widow."

Taking a seat in one of the Beefsteak's ancient but comfortable library wing chairs, Grey beckoned to one of the servants.

"Brandy—you, too, Stubbs? Yes, two brandies, if you please. And tell someone to fetch me when Colonel Quarry comes in, will you?"

"Thanks, old fellow; come round to my club and have one on me next time." Stubbs unbuckled his dress sword and handed it to the hovering servant before making himself comfortable in turn.

"Met your cousin the other day, by the bye," he remarked, wriggling his substantial buttocks deeply into the chair. "Out ridin' in the Row—handsome girl. Nice seat," he added judiciously.

"Indeed. Which cousin would that be?" Grey asked, with a small sinking feeling. He had several female cousins, but only two whom Stubbs might conceivably admire, and the way this day was going ...

"The Pearsall girl," Stubbs said cheerfully, confirming Grey's presentiment. "Olivia? That the name? I say, isn't she engaged to that chap Trevelyan? Thought I saw him just now in the dining room."

"You did," Grey said shortly, not anxious to speak about the Honorable Joseph at the moment. Once started on a conversational gambit, though, Stubbs was as difficult to deflect from his course as a twenty-pounder on a downhill slope, and Grey was obliged to hear a great deal regarding Trevelyan's activities and social prominence—things of which he was only too well aware.

"Any news from India?" he asked finally, in desperation.

This gambit worked; most of London was aware that Robert Clive was snapping at the Nawab of Bengal's heels, but Stubbs had a brother in the 46th Foot, presently besieging Calcutta with Clive, and was thus in a position to share any number of grisly details that had not yet made the pages of the newspaper.

"... so many British prisoners packed into the space, my brother said, that when they dropped from the heat, there was no place to put the bodies; those left alive were obliged to trample on the fallen underfoot. He said"—Stubbs looked round, lowering his voice slightly

—"some poor chaps had gone mad from the thirst. Drank the blood. When one of the fellows died, I mean. They'd slit the throat, the wrists, drain the body, then let it fall. Bryce said they could scarce put a name to half the dead when they pulled them out of that place, and —"

"Think we're bound there, too?" Grey interrupted, draining his glass and beckoning for another pair of drinks, in the faint hope of preserving some vestige of his appetite for luncheon.

"Dunno. Maybe—though I heard a bit of gossip last week, sounded rather as though it might be the Americas." Stubbs shook his head, frowning. "Can't say as there's much to choose between a Hindoo and a Mohawk—howling brutes, the lot—but there's the hell of a lot better chance of distinguishing oneself in India, you ask me."

"If you survive the heat, the insects, the poisonous serpents, and the dysentery, yes," Grey said. He closed his eyes in momentary bliss, savoring the balmy touch of English June that drifted through the open window.

Speculation was rampant and rumors rife as to the regiment's next posting. France, India, the American Colonies ... perhaps one of the German states, Prague on the Russian front, or even the West Indies. Great Britain was battling France for supremacy on three continents, and life was good for a soldier.

They passed an amiable quarter hour in such idle conjectures, during which Grey's mind was free to return to the difficulties posed by his inconvenient discovery. In the normal course of things, Trevelyan would be Hal's problem to deal with. But his elder brother was abroad at the moment, in France and unreachable, which left Grey as the man on the spot. The marriage between Trevelyan and Olivia Pearsall was set to take place in six weeks' time; something would have to be done, and done quickly.

Perhaps he had better consult Paul or Edgar—but neither of his half-brothers moved in society; Paul rusticated on his estate in Sussex, barely moving a foot as far as the nearest market town. As for Edgar ... no, Edgar would not be helpful. His notion of dealing discreetly with the matter would be to horsewhip Trevelyan on the steps of Westminster.

The appearance of a steward at the door, announcing the arrival of Colonel Quarry, put a temporary end to his distractions.

Rising, he touched Stubbs's shoulder.

"Fetch me after dinner, will you?" he said. "I'll come along on your

widow's walk, if you like. O'Connell was a good soldier."

"Oh, will you? That's sporting, Grey; thanks." Stubbs looked grateful; offering condolences to the bereaved was not his strong suit.

Trevelyan had fortunately concluded his meal and departed; the stewards were sweeping crumbs off the vacant table as Grey entered the dining room. Just as well; it would have curdled his stomach if he were obliged to look at the man while eating.

He greeted Harry Quarry cordially, and forced himself to make conversation over the soup course, though his mind was still preoccupied. Ought he to seek Harry's counsel in the matter? He hesitated, dipping his spoon. Quarry was bluff and frequently uncouth in manner, but he was a shrewd judge of character and more than knowledgeable in the messier sort of human affairs. He was of good family and knew how the world of society worked. Above all, he could be trusted to keep a confidence.

Well, then. Talking over the matter might at least clarify the situation in his own mind. He swallowed the last mouthful of broth and set down his spoon.

"Do you know Joseph Trevelyan?"

"The Honorable Mr. Trevelyan? Father a baronet, brother in Parliament, a fortune in Cornish tin, up to his eyeballs in the East India Company?" Harry raised his brows in irony. "Only to look at. Why?"

"He is engaged to marry my young cousin, Olivia Pearsall. I... merely wondered whether you had heard anything regarding his character."

"Bit late to be makin' that sort of inquiry, ain't it, if they're already betrothed?" Quarry spooned up a bit of unidentifiable vegetation from his soup bowl, eyed it critically, then shrugged and swallowed it. "Not your business anyway, is it? Surely her father's satisfied."

"She has no father. Nor mother. She is an orphan, and has been my brother Hal's ward these past ten years. She lives in my mother's household."

"Mm? Oh. Didn't know that." Quarry chewed bread slowly, thick brows lowered thoughtfully as he looked at his friend. "What's he done? Trevelyan, I mean, not your brother."

Lord John raised his own brows, toying with his soup spoon.

"Nothing, to my knowledge. Why ought he to have done anything?" "If he hadn't, you wouldn't be inquiring as to his character," Quarry pointed out logically. "Out with it, Johnny; what's he done?"

"Not so much what he's done, as the result of it." Lord John sat back, waiting until the steward had cleared away the course and retreated out of earshot. He leaned forward a little, lowering his voice well past the point of discretion, yet feeling the blood rise in his cheeks nonetheless.

It was absurd, he told himself. Any man might casually glance—but his own predilections rendered him more than delicate in such a situation; he could not bear the notion that anyone might suspect him of deliberate inspection. Not even Quarry—who, finding himself in a similarly accidental situation, would likely have seized Trevelyan by the offending member and loudly demanded to know the meaning of this.

"I ... happened to retire for a moment, earlier"—he nodded toward the Chinese screen—"and came upon Trevelyan, unexpectedly. I ... ah ... caught sight—" Christ, he was blushing like a girl; Quarry was grinning at his discomfiture.

"... think it is pox," he finished, his voice barely a murmur.

The grin vanished abruptly from Quarry's face, and he glanced at the Chinese screen, from behind which Lord Dewhurst and a friend were presently emerging, deep in conversation. Catching Quarry's gaze upon him, Dewhurst glanced down automatically, to be sure his flies were buttoned. Finding them secure, he glowered at Quarry and turned away toward his table.

"Pox." Quarry pitched his own voice low, but still a good deal louder than Grey would have liked. "You mean the syphilis?"

"I do."

"Sure you weren't seeing things? I mean, glimpse from the corner of the eye, bit of shadow ... easy to make a mistake, eh?"

"I shouldn't think so," Grey said tersely. At the same time, his mind grasped hopefully at the possibility. It *had* been only a glimpse. Perhaps he could be mistaken.... It was a very tempting thought.

Quarry glanced at the Chinese screen again. The windows were all open to the air, and the glorious June sunshine was streaming through them in floods. The air was like crystal; Grey could see individual grains of salt against the linen cloth, where he had upset the saltcellar in his agitation.

"Ah," Quarry said. He fell silent for a moment, tracing a pattern

with one forefinger in the spilled salt.

He didn't ask whether Grey would recognize a chancrous sore. Any young serving officer must now and then have been obliged to accompany the surgeon inspecting troops, to take note of any man so diseased as to require discharge. The variety of shapes and sizes—to say nothing of conditions—displayed on such occasions was common fodder for hilarity in the officers' mess on the evening following inspections.

"Well, where does he go whoring?" Quarry asked, looking up and rubbing salt from his finger.

"What?" Grey looked at him blankly.

Quarry raised one thick brow.

"Trevelyan. If he's poxed, he caught it somewhere, didn't he?"

"I daresay."

"Well, then." Quarry sat back in his chair, pleased.

"He needn't have caught it in a brothel," Grey pointed out. "Though I admit it's the most likely place. What difference does it make?"

Quarry raised both brows.

"The first thing is make certain of it, eh, before you stink up the whole of London with a public accusation. I take it you don't want to make overtures to the man yourself, in order to get a better look."

Quarry grinned widely, and Grey felt the blood rise in his chest, washing hot up his neck. "No," he said shortly. Then he collected himself and lounged back a little in his chair. "Not my sort," he drawled, flicking imaginary snuff from his ruffle.

Quarry guffawed, his own face flushed with a mixture of claret and amusement. He hiccuped, chortled again, and slapped both hands down on the table.

"Well, whores ain't so picky. And if a moggy will sell her body, she'll sell anything else she has—including information about her customers."

Grey stared blankly at the Colonel. Then the suggestion dropped into focus.

"You are suggesting that I employ a prostitute to verify my impressions?"

"You're quick, Grey, damn quick." Quarry nodded approval, snapping his fingers for more wine. "I was thinking more of finding a girl who'd seen his prick already, but your way's a long sight easier. All you've got to do is invite Trevelyan along to your favorite convent, slip the lady abbess a word—and a few quid—and there you are!"

"But I—" Grey stopped himself short of admitting that far from patronizing a favored bawdery, he hadn't been in such an establishment in several years. He had successfully suppressed the memory of the last such experience; he couldn't say now even which street the building had been in.

"It'll work a treat," Quarry assured him, ignoring his discomposure. "Not likely to be too dear, either; two pound would probably do it, three at most."

"But once I know whether my suspicion is confirmed—"

"Well, if he ain't poxed, there's no difficulty, and if he is ..." Quarry squinted in thought. "Hmm. Well, how's this? If you was to arrange for the whore to screech and carry on a bit, once she'd got a good look at him, then you rush out of your own girl's chamber, so as to see what's the matter, eh? House might be afire, after all." He chortled briefly, envisioning the scene, then returned to the plan.

"Then, if you've caught him with his breeches down, so to speak, and the situation revealed beyond doubt, I shouldn't think he'd have much choice save to find grounds for breaking the engagement himself. What d'ye say to that?"

"I suppose it might work," Grey said slowly, trying to picture the scene Quarry painted. Given a whore of sufficient histrionic talent ... and there would be no need for Grey actually to utilize the brothel's services personally, after all.

The wine arrived, and both men fell momentarily silent as it was poured. As the steward departed, though, Quarry leaned across the table, eyes alight.

"Let me know when you mean to go; I'll come along for the sport!"



Chapter 2

Widow's Walk

"France," Stubbs was saying in disgust, pushing his way through the crowd in Clare Market. "Bloody France again, can you believe it? I dined with DeVries, and he told me he'd had it direct from old Willie Howard. Guarding the shipyards in frigging Calais, likely!"

"Likely," Grey repeated, sidling past a fishmonger's barrow. "When, do you know?" He aped Stubbs's annoyance at the thought of a possibly humdrum French posting, but in fact, this was welcome news.

He was no more immune to the lure of adventure than any other soldier, and would enjoy to see the exotic sights of India. However, he was also well aware that such a foreign posting would likely keep him away from England for two years or more—away from Helwater.

A posting in Calais or Rouen, though ... he could return every few months without much difficulty, fulfilling the promise he had made to his Jacobite prisoner—a man who doubtless would be pleased never to see him again.

He shoved that thought resolutely aside. They had not parted on good terms—well, on any. But he had hopes in the power of time to heal the breach. At least Jamie Fraser was safe; decently fed and sheltered, and in a position where he had what freedom his parole allowed. Grey took comfort in the imagined vision—a long-legged man striding over the high fells of the Lake District, face turned up toward sun and scudding cloud, wind blowing through the richness of his auburn hair, plastering shirt and breeches tight against a lean, hard body.

"Hoy! This way!" A shout from Stubbs pulled him rudely from his

thoughts, to find the Lieutenant behind him, gesturing impatiently down a side street. "Wherever is your mind today, Major?"

"Just thinking of the new posting." Grey stepped over a drowsy, moth-eaten bitch, stretched out across his way and equally oblivious both to his passage and to the scrabble of puppies tugging at her dugs. "If it is France, at least the wine will be decent."

O'Connell's widow dwelt in rooms above an apothecary's shop in Brewster's Alley, where the buildings faced each other across a space so narrow that the summer sunshine failed to penetrate to ground level. Stubbs and Grey walked in clammy shadow, kicking away bits of rubbish deemed too decrepit to be of use to the denizens of the place.

Grey followed Stubbs through the shop's narrow door, beneath a sign reading F. SCANLON, APOTHECARY, in faded script. He paused to stamp his foot in order to dislodge a strand of rotting vegetation that had slimed itself across his boot, but looked up at the sound of a voice from the shadows near the back of the shop.

"Good day to ye, gentlemen." The voice was soft, with a strong Irish accent.

"Mr. Scanlon?"

Grey blinked in the gloom, and made out the proprietor, a dark, burly man hovering spiderlike over his counter, arms outspread as though ready to snatch up any bit of merchandise required upon the moment.

"Finbar Scanlon, the same." The man inclined his head courteously. "What might I have the pleasure to be doin' for ye, sirs, may I ask?"

"Mrs. O'Connell," Stubbs said briefly, jerking a thumb upward as he headed for the back of the shop, not waiting on an invitation.

"Ah, herself is away just now," the apothecary said, sidling quickly out from behind the counter in order to block the way. Behind him, a faded curtain of striped linen swayed in the breeze from the door, presumably concealing a staircase to the upper premises.

"Gone where?" Grey asked sharply. "Will she return?"

"Oh, aye. She's gone round for to speak to the priest about the funeral. Ye'll know of her loss, I suppose?" Scanlon's eyes flicked from one officer to the other, gauging their purpose.

"Of course," Stubbs said shortly, annoyed at Mrs. O'Connell's

absence. He had no wish to prolong their errand. "That's why we've come. Will she be back soon?"

"Oh, I couldn't be saying as to that, sir. Might take some time." The man stepped out into the light from the door. Middle-aged, Grey saw, with silver threads in his neatly tied hair, but well-built, and with an attractive, clean-shaven face and dark eyes.

"Might I be of some help, sir? If ye've condolences for the widow, I should be happy to deliver them." The man gave Stubbs a look of straightforward openness—but Grey saw the tinge of speculation in it.

"No," he said, forestalling Stubbs's reply. "We'll wait in her rooms for her." He turned toward the striped curtain, but the apothecary's hand gripped his arm, halting him.

"Will ye not take a drink, gentlemen, to cheer your wait? 'Tis the least I can offer, in respect of the departed." The Irishman gestured invitingly toward the cluttered shelves behind his counter, where several bottles of spirit stood among the pots and jars of the apothecary's stock.

"Hmm." Stubbs rubbed his knuckles across his mouth, eyes on the bottle. "It was rather a long walk."

It had been, and Grey, too, accepted the offered drink, though with some reluctance, seeing Scanlon's long fingers nimbly selecting an assortment of empty jars and tins to serve as drinking vessels.

"Tim O'Connell," Scanlon said, lifting his own tin, whose label showed a drawing of a woman swooning on a chaise longue. "The finest soldier who ever raised a musket and shot a Frenchman dead. May he rest in peace!"

"Tim O'Connell," Grey and Stubbs muttered in unison, lifting their jars in brief acknowledgment.

Grey turned slightly as he brought the jar to his lips, so that the light from the door illuminated the liquid within. There was a strong smell from whatever had previously filled the jar—anise? camphor?—overlaying the smell of alcohol, but there were no suspicious crumbs floating in it, at least.

"Where was Sergeant O'Connell killed, do you know?" Grey asked, lowering his makeshift cup after a small sip, and clearing his throat. The liquid seemed to be straight grain alcohol, clear and tasteless, but potent. His palate and nasal passages felt as though they had been seared.

Scanlon swallowed, coughed, and blinked, eyes watering—presumably from the liquor, rather than emotion—then shook his

head.

"Somewhere near the river, is all I heard. The constable who came to bring the news said he was bashed about somethin' shocking, though. Knocked on the head in some class of a tavern fight and then trampled in the scrum, perhaps. The constable did mention that there was a heelprint on his forehead, God have mercy on the poor man."

"No one arrested?" Stubbs wheezed, face going red with the strain of not coughing.

"No, sir. As I understand the matter, the body was found lyin' half in the water, on the steps by Puddle Dock. Like enough, the tavern owner it was who dragged him out and dumped him, not wantin' the nuisance of a corpse on his premises."

"Likely," Grey echoed. "So no one knows precisely where or how the death occurred?"

The apothecary shook his head solemnly, picking up the bottle.

"No, sir. But then, none of us knows where or when we shall die, do we? The only surety of it is that we shall all one day depart this world, and heaven grant we may be welcome in the next. A drop more, gentlemen?"

Stubbs accepted, settling himself comfortably onto a proffered stool, one booted foot propped against the counter. Grey declined, and strolled casually round the shop, cup in hand, idly inspecting the stock while the other two lapsed into cordial conversation.

The shop appeared to do a roaring business in aids to virility, prophylactics against pregnancy, and remedies for the drip, the clap, and other hazards of sexual congress. Grey deduced the presence of a brothel in the near neighborhood, and was oppressed anew at the thought of the Honorable Joseph Trevelyan, whose existence he had momentarily succeeded in forgetting.

"Those can be supplied with ribbons in regimental colors, sir," Scanlon called, seeing him pause before a jaunty assortment of *Condoms Design'd for Gentlemen*, each sample displayed on a glass mold, the ribbons that secured the neck of each device coiled delicately around the foot of its mold. "Sheep's gut or goat, per your preference, sir—scented, three farthings extra. That would be gratis to you gentlemen, of course," he added urbanely, bowing as he tilted the neck of the bottle over Stubbs's cup again.

"Thank you," Grey said politely. "Perhaps later." He scarcely noticed what he was saying, his attention caught by a row of stoppered bottles.

Mercuric Sulphide, read the labels on several, and *Guiacum* on others. The contents appeared to differ in appearance, but the descriptive wording was the same for both:

For swift and efficacious treatment of the gonorrhoea, soft shanker, syphilis, and all other forms of venereal pox.

For a moment, he had the wild thought of inviting Trevelyan to dinner, and introducing one of these promising substances into his food. Unfortunately, he had too much experience to put any trust in such remedies; a dear friend, Peter Tewkes, had died the year before, after undergoing a mercuric "salivation" for the treatment of syphilis at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, after several attempts at patent remedy had failed.

Grey had not witnessed the process personally, having been exiled in Scotland at the time, but had heard from mutual friends who had visited Tewkes, and who had talked feelingly of the vile effects of mercury, whether applied within or without.

He couldn't allow Olivia to marry Trevelyan if he was indeed afflicted; still, he had no desire to be arrested himself for attempted poisoning of the man.

Stubbs, always gregarious, was allowing himself to be drawn into a discussion of the Indian campaign; the papers had carried news of Clive's advance toward Calcutta, and the whole of London was buzzing with excitement.

"Aye, and isn't one of me cousins with Himself?" the apothecary was saying, drawing himself up with evident pride. "The Eighty-first, and no finer class of soldiers to be found on God's green earth"—he grinned, flashing good teeth—"savin' your presences, sirs, to be sure."

"Eighty-first?" Stubbs said, looking puzzled. "Thought you said your cousin was with the Sixty-third."

"Both, sir, bless you. I've several cousins, and the family runs to soldiers."

His attention thus returned to the apothecary, Grey slowly became aware that something was slightly wrong about the man. He strolled closer, eyeing Scanlon covertly over the rim of his cup. The man was nervous—why? His hands were steady as he poured the liquor, but there were lines of strain around his eyes, and his jaw was set in a way quite at odds with his stream of casual talk. The day was warm,

but it was not so warm in the shop as to justify the slick of sweat at the apothecary's temples.

Grey glanced round the shop, but saw nothing amiss. Was Scanlon concealing some illicit dealings? They were not far from the Thames here; Puddle Dock, where O'Connell's body had been found, was just by the confluence of the Thames and the Fleet, and petty smuggling was likely a way of life for everyone in the neighborhood with a boat. An apothecary would be particularly well-placed to dispose of contraband.

If that was the case, though, why be alarmed by the presence of two army officers? Smuggling would be the concern of the London magistrates, or the Excise, perhaps the naval authorities, but—

A small, distinct thump came from overhead.

"What's that?" he asked sharply, looking up.

"Oh—naught but the cat," the apothecary replied at once, with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Wretched creatures, cats, but mice bein' more wretched creatures still ..."

"Not a cat." Grey's eyes were fixed on the ceiling, where bunches of dried herbs hung from the beams. As he watched, one bundle trembled briefly, then the one beside it; a fine gold dust sifted down, the motes visible in the beam of light from the door.

"Someone's walking about upstairs." Ignoring the apothecary's protest, he strode to the linen curtain, pushed it aside, and was halfway up the narrow stair, hand on his sword hilt, before Stubbs had gathered his wits sufficiently to follow.

The room above was cramped and dingy, but sunlight shone through a pair of windows onto a battered table and stool—and an even more battered woman, open-mouthed with surprise as she froze in the act of setting down a dish of bread and cheese.

"Mrs. O'Connell?" She turned her head toward him, and Grey froze. Her open mouth was swollen, lips split, a dark-red gap showing in the gum where a lower tooth had been knocked out. Both eyes were puffed to slits, and she peered through a mask of yellowing bruises. By some miracle, her nose had not been broken; the slender bridge and fine nostrils protruded from the wreck, pale-skinned and freakish by contrast.

She lifted a hand to her face, turning away from the light as though ashamed of her appearance.

"I ... yes. I'm Francine O'Connell," she murmured, through the fan of her fingers.

"Mrs. O'Connell!" Stubbs took a stride toward her, then stopped, uncertain whether to touch her. "Who—who has done this to you?"

"Her husband. And may his soul rot in hell." The remark came from behind them, in a conversational tone of voice. Grey turned to see the apothecary advance into the room, his manner still superficially casual, but all his attention focused on the woman.

"Her husband, eh?" Stubbs, no fool, for all his geniality, reached out and seized the apothecary's hands, turning the knuckles to the light. The man suffered the inspection calmly enough, then pulled his unmarred hands back from Stubbs's grip. As though the action granted him license, he crossed to the woman and stood beside her, radiating subdued defiance.

"True it is," he said, still outwardly calm. "Tim O'Connell was a fine man when sober, but when the drink was on him ... a fiend in human form, no less." He shook his head, tight-lipped.

Grey exchanged a glance with Stubbs. This was true; they shared a memory of extricating O'Connell from a gaol in Richmond, following a riotous night's leave. The constable and the gaoler had both borne the marks of the arrest, though neither had been as badly off as O'Connell's wife.

"And what is your relation to Mrs. O'Connell, if I might ask?" Grey inquired politely. It was hardly necessary to ask; he could see the woman's body sway toward the apothecary, like a twining vine deprived of its trellis.

"I am her landlord, to be sure," the man replied blandly, putting a hand on Mrs. O'Connell's elbow. "And a friend of the family."

"A friend of the family," Stubbs echoed. "Quite." His wide blue gaze descended, resting deliberately on the woman's midsection, where her apron bulged with a pregnancy of five or six months' progress. The regiment—and Sergeant O'Connell—had returned to London a scant six weeks before.

Stubbs glanced at Grey, a question in his eyes. Grey lifted one shoulder slightly, then gave the faintest of nods. Whoever had done for Sergeant O'Connell, it was plainly not his wife—and the money was not theirs to withhold, in any case.

Stubbs gave a small growl, but reached into his coat and drew out a purse, which he tossed onto the table.

"A small token of remembrance and esteem," he said, hostility plain in his voice. "From your husband's comrades."

"Shroud money, is it? I don't want it." The woman no longer leaned

on Scanlon, but drew herself upright. She was pale beneath the bruises, but her voice was strong. "Take it back. I'll bury me husband meself."

"One might wonder," Grey said politely, "why a soldier's wife should wish to reject assistance from his fellows. Conscience, do you think?"

The apothecary's face darkened at that, and his fists closed at his sides.

"What d'ye say?" he demanded. "That she did him to death, and 'tis the guilt of the knowledge causes her to spurn your coin? Show 'em your hands, Francie!"

He reached down and seized the woman's hands, jerking them up to display. The little finger of one hand was bandaged to a splint of wood; otherwise, her hands bore no marks save the scars of healed burns and the roughened knuckles of daily work—the hands of any housewife too poor to afford a drudge.

"I do not suppose that Mrs. O'Connell beat her husband to death personally, no," Grey replied, still polite. "But the question of conscience need not apply only to her own deeds, need it? It might also apply to deeds performed on her behalf—or at her behest."

"Not conscience." The woman pulled her hands away from Scanlon with sudden violence, the wreck of her face quivering. Emotions shifted like sea currents beneath the blotched skin as she glanced from one man to the other.

"I will tell ye why I spurn your gift, sirs. And that is not conscience, but pride." The slit eyes rested on Grey, hard and bright as diamonds. "Or do you think a poor woman such as meself is not entitled to her pride?"

"Pride in what?" Stubbs demanded. He looked pointedly again at her belly. "Adultery?"

To Stubbs's displeased surprise, she laughed.

"Adultery, is it? Well, and if it is, I'm not the first to be after doing it. Tim O'Connell left me last year in the spring; took up with a doxy from the stews, he did, and took what money we had to buy her gauds. When he came here two days ago, 'twas the first time I'd seen him in near on a year. If it were not for Mr. Scanlon offerin' me shelter and work, I should no doubt have become the whore ye think me."

"Better a whore to one man than to many, I suppose," Grey said under his breath, putting a hand on Stubbs's arm to prevent further intemperate remarks.

"Still, madam," he went on, raising his voice, "I do not quite see why you object to accepting a gift from your husband's fellows to help bury him—if indeed you have no sense of guilt over his demise."

The woman drew herself up, crossing her arms beneath her bosom.

"Will I take yon purse and use it to have fine words said over the stinkin' corpse of the man? Or worse, light candles and buy Masses for a soul that's flamin' now in the pits of hell, if there is justice in the Lord? That I will not, sir!"

Grey eyed her with interest—and a certain amount of admiration—then glanced at the apothecary, to see how he took this speech. Scanlon had dropped back a step; his eyes were fixed on the woman's bruised face, a slight frown between the heavy brows.

Grey settled the silver gorget that hung at his neck, then leaned forward and picked up the purse from the table, jingling it gently in his palm.

"As you will, madam. Do you wish also to reject the pension to which you are entitled, as a sergeant's widow?" Such a pension was little enough; but given the woman's situation ...

She stood for a moment, undecided, then her head lifted again.

"That, I'll take," she said, giving him a glittering look through one slitted eye. "I've earned it."



Chapter 3

O What a Tangled Web We Weave

There was nothing for it but report the matter. Finding someone to report to was more difficult; with the regiment refitting and furbishing for a new posting, there were constant comings and goings. The usual parade had been temporarily discontinued, and no one was where he ought to be. It was just past sunset of the following day when Grey eventually ran Quarry to earth, in the smoking room at the Beefsteak.

"Were they telling the truth, d'ye think?" Quarry pursed his lips, and blew a thoughtful smoke ring. "Scanlon and the woman?"

Grey shook his head, concentrating on getting his fresh cheroot to draw. Once it seemed well alight, he took it from his lips long enough to answer.

"She was—mostly. He wasn't."

Quarry's brows lifted, then dropped in a frown.

"Sure of it? You said he was nervous; might that be only because he didn't want you to discover Mrs. O'Connell, and thus his relations with her?"

"Yes," Grey said. "But even after we'd spoken with her ... I can't say precisely what it was that Scanlon was lying *about*—or even that he lied, specifically. But he knew something about O'Connell's death that he wasn't telling straight, or I'm a Dutchman."

Quarry grunted in response to this, and lay back in his chair, smoking fiercely and scowling at the ceiling in concentration. Indolent by nature, Harry Quarry disliked thinking, but he could do it when obliged to.

Respecting the labor involved, Grey said nothing, taking an

occasional pull from the Spanish cigar that had been pressed upon him by Quarry, who fancied the exotic weed. He himself normally drank tobacco smoke only medicinally, when suffering from a heavy rheum, but the smoking room at the Beefsteak offered the best chance of private conversation at this time of day, most members being at their suppers.

Grey's stomach growled at the thought of supper, but he ignored it. Time enough for food later.

Quarry removed the cigar from his lips long enough to say, "Damn your brother," then replaced it and resumed his contemplation of the pastoral frolic taking place on the gessoed ceiling above.

Grey nodded, in substantial agreement with this sentiment. Hal was Colonel of the Regiment, as well as the head of Grey's family. Hal was presently in France—had been for a month—and his temporary absence was creating an uncomfortable burden on those required to shoulder those responsibilities that were rightfully his. Nothing to be done about it, though; duty was duty.

In Hal's absence, command of the regiment devolved upon its two regular Colonels, Harry Quarry and Bernard Sydell. Grey had had not the slightest hesitation in choosing to whom to make his report. Sydell was an elderly man, crotchety and strict, with little knowledge of his troops and less interest in them.

Observing the inferno in progress, one of the ever-watchful servants came silently forward to place a small porcelain dish on Quarry's chest, lest the fuming ashes of his cigar set his waistcoat on fire. Quarry ignored this, puffing rhythmically and making occasional small growling noises between his teeth.

Grey's cheroot had burnt itself out by the time Quarry removed the porcelain dish from his chest and the soggy remains of his own cigar from his mouth. He sat up and sighed deeply.

"No help for it," he said. "You'll have to know."

"Know what?"

"We think O'Connell was a spy."

Astonishment and dismay vied for place in Grey's bosom with a certain feeling of satisfaction. He'd known there was something fishy about the situation in Brewster's Alley—and it wasn't codfish.

"A spy for whom?" They were alone; the ubiquitous servant had disappeared momentarily, but Grey nonetheless glanced round and lowered his voice.

"We don't know." Quarry squashed the stump of his cigar into the

dish and set it aside. "That was why your brother decided to leave him be for a bit after we began to suspect him—in hopes of discovering his paymaster, once the regiment was back in London."

That made sense; while O'Connell might have gathered useful military information in the field, he would have found it infinitely easier to pass it on in the seething anthill of London—where men of every nation on earth mingled daily in the streams of commerce that flowed up the Thames—than in the shoulder-rubbing confines of a military camp.

"Oh, I see," Grey said, shooting a sharp glance at Quarry as the light dawned. "Hal took advantage of the gossip regarding the regimental posting, didn't he? Stubbs told me after luncheon that he'd heard from DeVries that we were definitely set for France again—likely Calais. I take it that was misdirection, for O'Connell's benefit?"

Quarry regarded him blandly. "Wasn't announced officially, was it?"

"No. And we take it that the coincidence of such an unofficial decision and the sudden demise of Sergeant O'Connell is sufficient to be ... interesting?"

"Depends on your tastes, I s'pose," Quarry said, heaving a deep sigh. "Damn nuisance, I call it."

The servant came quietly back into the room, bearing a humidor in one hand, a rack of pipes in the other. The supper hour was drawing to a close, and those members who liked a smoke to settle their digestions would be coming down the hallway shortly, each to claim his own pipe and his preferred chair.

Grey sat frowning for a moment.

"Why was ... the gentleman in question ... suspected?"

"Can't tell you that." Quarry lifted one shoulder, leaving it unclear as to whether his reticence was a matter of ignorance or of official discretion.

"I see. So perhaps my brother is in France—and perhaps he isn't?"

A slight smile twitched the white scar on Quarry's cheek.

"You'd know better than I would, Grey."

The servant had gone out again, to fetch the other humidors; several members kept their personal blends of tobacco and snuff at the club. He could already hear the stir from the dining room, of scraping chairs and postprandial conversation. Grey leaned forward, ready to rise.

"But you had him followed, of course—O'Connell. Someone must

have kept a close eye on him in London."

"Oh, yes." Quarry shook himself into rough order, brushing ash from the knees of his breeches and pulling down his rumpled waistcoat. "Hal found a man. Very discreet, well-placed. A footman employed by a friend of the family—your family, that is."

"And that friend would be ..."

"The Honorable Joseph Trevelyan." Heaving himself to his feet, Quarry led the way out of the smoking room, leaving Grey to follow as he might, senses reeling from more than tobacco smoke.

It all made a horrid sense, though, he thought, following Quarry toward the door. Trevelyan's family and Grey's had been associated for the last couple of centuries, and it was in some part Joseph Trevelyan's friendship with Hal that had led to his betrothal to Olivia in the first place.

It wasn't a close friendship; one founded on a commonality of association, clubs, and political interests, rather than on personal affection. Still, if Hal had been looking for a discreet man to put on O'Connell's trail, it would have been necessary to look outside the army—for who knew what alliances O'Connell had formed, both within the regiment and outside it? And so, evidently, Hal had spoken to his friend Trevelyan, who had recommended his own footman ... and it was simply a matter of dreadful irony that he, Grey, should now be obliged to interfere in Trevelyan's personal life.

Outside the Beefsteak, the doorman had procured a commercial carriage; Quarry was already into it, beckoning Grey impatiently.

"Come along, come along! I'm starving. We'll go up to Kettrick's, shall we? They do an excellent eel pie there. I could relish an eel pie, and perhaps a bucket or two of stout to go along. Wash the smoke down, what?"

Grey nodded, setting his hat on the seat beside him where it wouldn't be crushed. Quarry stuck his head out the window and shouted up to the driver, then pulled it in and relapsed back onto the grimy squabs with a sigh.

"So," Quarry went on, raising his voice slightly to be heard over the rattle and squeak of the carriage, "this man, Trevelyan's footman—Byrd, his name is, Jack Byrd—he took up rooms across from the slammerkin O'Connell lived with. Been following the Sergeant to and

fro, up and down London, for the past six weeks."

Grey glanced out of the window; the weather had kept fine for several days, but was about to break. Thunder growled in the distance, and he could feel the coming rain in the air that chilled his face and freshened his lungs.

"What does this Byrd say occurred, then, the night that O'Connell was killed?"

"Nothing." Quarry settled his wig more firmly on his head as a gust of moisture-laden wind swept through the carriage.

"He lost O'Connell?"

Quarry's blunt features twisted wryly.

"No, we've lost Jack Byrd. Man hasn't been seen or heard of since the night O'Connell was killed."

The carriage was slowing, the driver chirruping to his team as they made the turn into the Strand. Grey settled his cloak about his shoulders and picked up his hat, in anticipation of their arrival.

"No sign of his body?"

"None. Which rather suggests that whatever happened to O'Connell, it wasn't a simple brawl."

Grey rubbed at his face, rasping the bristles on his jaw. He was hungry, and his linen was grimy after the day's exertions. The clammy feel of it made him feel seedy and irritable.

"Which rather suggests that whatever happened wasn't the fault of Scanlon, then—for why should he be concerned with Byrd?" He wasn't sure whether to be pleased at this deduction or not. He *knew* the apothecary had been lying to him in some way—but at the same time, he felt some sympathy for Mrs. O'Connell. She would be in a bad way if Scanlon was taken up for murder and hanged or transported—and a worse one, were she to be accused of conspiracy in the affair.

The opposite bench was harlequined with light and shadow as they clopped slowly past a group of flambeaux-men, lighting a party home. He saw Quarry shrug, obviously as irritable as he was himself from lack of food.

"If Scanlon had spotted Byrd following O'Connell, he might have put Byrd out of the way, as well—but why bother to hide it? A brawl might produce multiple bodies, easy as one. They often do, God knows."

"But if it was someone else," Grey said slowly, "someone who wanted O'Connell out of the way, either because he asked too much

or because they feared he might give them away?..."

"The spymaster? Or his representative, at least. Could be. Again, though—why hide the body, if he did for Byrd, too?"

The alternative was obvious.

"He didn't kill Byrd. He bought him off."

"Damn likely. Directly I heard of O'Connell's death, I sent a man to search the place he was living, but he didn't find a thing. And Stubbs had a good look round the widow's place, as well, while you were there—but not a bean, he says. Not a paper in the place."

He'd seen Stubbs poking round as he made arrangements for the payment of O'Connell's pension to his widow, but had paid no particular attention at the time. It was true, though; Mrs. O'Connell's room was spartan in its furnishing, completely lacking in books or papers of any kind.

"What were they searching for?"

The bearlike growl that emerged from the shadows in reply might have been Quarry, or merely his stomach giving voice to its hunger.

"Don't know for sure what it might look like," Quarry admitted reluctantly. "It will be writing of some kind, though."

"You don't know? What sort of thing is it—or am I not allowed to know that?"

Quarry eyed him, fingers drumming slowly on the seat beside him. Then he shrugged; official discretion be damned, evidently.

"Just before we came back from France, O'Connell took the ordnance requisitions into Calais. He was late—all the other regiments had turned in their papers days before. The damn fool clerk had left the lot just sitting on his desk, if you can believe it! Granted, the office was locked, but still ..."

Returning from a leisurely luncheon, the clerk had discovered the door forced, the desk ransacked—and every scrap of paper in the office gone.

"I shouldn't have thought one man could carry the amount of paper to be found in an office of that sort," Grey said, half-joking.

Quarry flipped one hand, impatient.

"It was a clerk's hole, not the office proper. Nothing else there was important—but the quarterly ordnance requisitions for every British regiment between Calais and Prague!..."

Grey pursed his lips, nodding in acknowledgment. It was a serious matter. Information on troop movements and disposition was highly sensitive, but such plans could be changed, if it became known that the intelligence had fallen into the wrong hands. The munitions requirements for a regiment could not be altered—and the sum total of that information would tell an enemy almost to the gun what strength and what weaponry each regiment possessed.

"Even so," he objected. "It must have been a massive amount of paper. Not the sort of thing a man could easily conceal about his person."

"No, it would have taken a large rucksack, or a sail bag—something of that sort—to cart it all away. But cart it away someone did."

The alarm had been raised promptly, of course, and a search instigated, but Calais was a medieval warren of a place, and nothing had been found.

"Meanwhile, O'Connell disappeared—quite properly; he was given three days' leave when he took the requisitions in. We hunted for him; found him on the second day, smelling of drink and looking as though he hadn't slept for the whole of the time."

"Which would be quite as usual."

"Yes, it would. But that's also what you'd expect a man to look like who'd sat up for two days and nights in a hired room, making a précis of that mass of paper and turning it into something a good bit smaller and more portable—feeding the requisitions into the fire as he went."

"So they weren't ever found? The originals?"

"No. We watched O'Connell carefully; he had no chance to pass on the information to anyone after that—and we think it unlikely that he handed it on before we found him."

"Because now he's dead—and because Jack Byrd has disappeared."

"Rem acu tetigisti," Quarry replied, then snorted, half-pleased with himself.

Grey smiled in spite of himself. "You have touched the matter with a needle"; it meant, "you've put your finger on it." Probably the only bit of Latin Quarry recalled from his schooldays, other than *cave canem*.

"And was O'Connell the only suspect?"

"No, damn it. Hence the difficulty. We couldn't simply arrest him and sweat the truth out of him with no more evidence than the fact of his being there. At least six other men—all from different regiments, damn it!—were there during the relevant time, as well."

"I see. So the other regiments are now quietly investigating *their* potential black sheep?"

"They are. On the other hand," Quarry added judiciously, "the other

five are still alive. Which might be an indication, eh?"

The coach stopped, and the sounds and smells of Kettrick's Eel-Pye House floated through the window: laughter and talk, the sizzle of food and clank of wooden plates and pie tins. The brine-smell of jellied eels and ale and the solace of floury pies lapped round them, warm and comforting, spiced with the sauce of alcoholic conviviality.

"Do we know for certain how O'Connell was killed? Did anyone from the regiment see the body?" Grey asked suddenly, as Quarry descended heavily to the pavement.

"No," Quarry said, not looking round, but heading for the door with single-minded determination. "You're going to go and do that tomorrow, before they bury the bugger."

Grey waited until the pies had been set down in front of them before he undertook to argue with Quarry's statement that he, Grey, was forthwith relieved of other duties in order to pursue an investigation into the activities and death of Sergeant Timothy O'Connell.

"Why me?" Grey was astonished. "Surely it's sufficiently serious a matter to justify the senior ranking officer's attention—that would be you, Harry," he pointed out, "or possibly Bernard."

Quarry had his eyes closed in momentary bliss, mouth full of eel pie. He chewed slowly, swallowed, then opened his eyes reluctantly.

"Bernard—ha-ha. Very funny." He brushed crumbs from his chest. "As for me ... well, it might be, ordinarily. Fact is, though—I was in Calais, too, when the requisitions were taken. Could have done it meself. Didn't, of course, but I could have."

"No one in his right mind would suspect you, Harry, surely?"

"Think the War Office is in its right mind, do you?" Quarry raised one cynical eyebrow, along with his spoon.

"I take your point. But still ..."

"Crenshaw was on home leave," Quarry said, naming one of the captains of the regiment. "Meant to be in England, but who's to say he didn't sneak back to Calais?"

"And Captain Wilmot? You can't all have been on leave!"

"Oh, Wilmot was in camp where he ought to have been, all proper and above suspicion. But he had a fit of some sort at his club this Monday past. Apoplexy, the quack says. Can't walk, can't talk, can't view bodies." Quarry pointed his spoon briefly at Grey's chest. "You're Grey opened his mouth to expostulate further, but finding no good argument to hand, inserted a bite of pie instead, chewing moodily.

With fate's usual turn for irony, the scandal that had sent him to Ardsmuir in disgrace had now placed him beyond suspicion, as the only functioning senior officer of the regiment who could not possibly have had anything to do with the disappearance of the Calais requisitions. He had returned from his Scottish exile by the time of the disappearance, true—but had probably been in London, having not formally rejoined his regiment until a month ago.

Harry had a genius for avoiding unpleasant jobs, but in the present situation, Grey was forced to admit it wasn't entirely Harry's doing.

Kettrick's was crowded, as usual, but they had found a bench in a secluded corner, and their uniforms kept the other diners at a safe distance. The clatter of spoons and pie tins, the crash and scrape of shifting benches, and the raucous conversation bouncing from the low wooden rafters provided more than sufficient cover for a private conversation. Nonetheless, Grey leaned closer and lowered his voice.

"Does the Cornish gentleman of whom we were speaking earlier know that his servant is *incommunicabilis*?" Grey asked circumspectly.

Quarry nodded, champing eel pie industriously. He coughed to clear a bit of pastry from his throat, and took a deep pull at his tankard of stout.

"Oh, yes. We thought the servant in question might have been scared off by whatever it was that happened to the sergeant—in which case, the natural thing would be for him to scuttle off back to ... his place of employment." Quarry beetled his brows at Grey, indicating that naturally he understood the necessity for discretion—did Grey think him dense? "Sent Stubbs round to ask—no sign of him. Our Cornish friend is disturbed."

Grey nodded, and conversation was temporarily suspended while both men concentrated on their meal. Grey was scraping a bit of bread round his empty pannikin, unwilling to let a drop of the savory broth escape, when Quarry, having polished off two pies and three pints, belched amiably and chose to resume in a more social vein.

"Speakin' of Cornishmen, what have you done about your putative cousin-in-law? Arranged to take him to a brothel yet?"

"He says he doesn't go to brothels," Grey replied tersely, recalled unwillingly to the matter of his cousin's marriage. Christ, weren't spies and suspected murder enough? "And you're letting him marry your cousin?" Quarry's thick brows drew down. "How d'ye know he's not impotent, or a sodomite, let alone diseased?"

"I am reasonably sure," Lord John said, repressing the sudden insane urge to remark that, after all, the Honorable Mr. Trevelyan had not been watching *him* at the chamber pot.

He had called on Trevelyan earlier in the day, with an invitation to supper and various libidinous "amusements" to bid a proper farewell to Trevelyan's bachelorhood. Trevelyan had agreed with thanks to a cordial supper, but claimed to have promised his mother upon her deathbed to have nothing to do with prostitutes.

Quarry's shaggy brows shot up.

"What sort of mother talks about whores on her deathbed? Your mother wouldn't do that, would she?"

"I have no idea," Grey said. "The situation has fortunately not arisen. But I suppose," he said, attempting to divert the conversation, "that surely there *are* men who do not seek such recreation...."

Quarry gave him a look of jaundiced doubt. "Damn few," he said. "And Trevelyan ain't one of 'em."

"You seem sure of it," Grey said, slightly piqued.

"I am." Quarry settled back, looking pleased with himself. "Asked around a bit—no, no, I was quite discreet, no need to fret. Trevelyan goes to a house in Meacham Street. Good taste; been there meself."

"Oh?" Grey set aside his empty pie pan, and raised a brow in interest. "Why would he not wish to go with me, I wonder?"

"Maybe afraid you'll blab to Olivia, disillusion the girl." Quarry lifted a massive shoulder in dismissal of Trevelyan's possible motives. "Be that as it may—why not go round and speak to the whores there? Chap I talked to says he's seen Trevelyan there at least twice a month—good chance whichever girl he took last can tell you if he's poxed or not."

"Yes, perhaps," Grey said slowly. Quarry took this for immediate agreement, and tossed back the remains of his final pint, belching slightly as he set it down.

"Splendid. We'll go round day after tomorrow, then."

"Day after tomorrow?"

"Got to go to dinner at my brother's house tomorrow—my sister-inlaw is having Lord Worplesdon."

"Steamed, boiled, or baked en croûte?"

Quarry guffawed, his already ruddy face achieving a deeper hue

under the stress of amusement.

"Oh, a good one, Johnny! I'll tell Amanda—come to think, shall I have her invite you? She's fond of you, you know."

"No, no," Grey said hastily. He was in turn fond of Quarry's sister-in-law, Lady Joffrey, but was only too well aware that she regarded him not merely as a friend, but also as prey—a potential husband for one of her myriad sisters and cousins. "I am engaged tomorrow. But this brothel you've discovered—"

"Well, no time like the present, I agree," Harry said, pushing back his bench. "But you'll need your rest tonight, if you're going to look at bodies in the morning. Besides," he added, swirling his cloak over his shoulders, "I'm never at me best in bed after eel pie. Makes me fart."



Chapter 4

A Valet Calls

Next morning, Grey sat in his bedchamber, unshaven and attired in his nightshirt, banyan, and slippers, drinking tea and debating with himself whether the authoritative benefits conferred by wearing his uniform outweighed the possible consequences—both sartorial and social—of wearing it into the slums of London to inspect a three-day-old corpse. He was disturbed in this meditation by his new orderly, Private Adams, who opened the bedroom door and entered without ceremony.

"A person, my lord," Adams reported, and stood smartly to attention.

Never at his best early in the day, Grey took a moody swallow of tea and nodded in acknowledgment of this announcement. Adams, new both to Grey and to the job of personal orderly, took this for permission and stood aside, gesturing the person in question into the room.

"Who are you?" Grey gazed in blank astonishment at the young man who stood thus revealed.

"Tom Byrd, me lord," the young man said, and bowed respectfully, hat in hand. Short and stocky, with a head round as a cannonball, he was young enough still to sport freckles across fair, rounded cheeks and over the bridge of his snubbed nose. Despite his obvious youth, though, he radiated a remarkable air of determination.

"Byrd. Byrd. Oh, Byrd!" Lord John's sluggish mental processes began to engage themselves. Tom Byrd. Presumably this young man was some relation to the vanished Jack Byrd. "Why are you—oh. Perhaps Mr. Trevelyan has sent you?"

"Yes, me lord. Colonel Quarry sent him a note last night, saying as how you was going to be looking into the matter of ... er-hem." He cleared his throat ostentatiously, with a glance at Adams, who had taken up the shaving brush and was industriously swishing it to and fro in the soap mug, working up a great lather of suds. "Mr. Trevelyan said as how I was to come and assist, whatsoever thing it might be your lordship had need of."

"Oh? I see; how kind of him." Grey was amused at Byrd's air of dignity, but favorably impressed at his discretion. "What duties are you accustomed to perform in Mr. Trevelyan's household, Tom?"

"I'm a footman, sir." Byrd stood as straight as he could, chin lifted in an attempt at an extra inch of height; footmen were normally employed for appearance as much as for skill, and tended to be tall and well-formed; Byrd was about Grey's own height.

Grey rubbed his upper lip, then set aside his teacup and glanced at Adams, who had put down the soap mug and was now holding the razor in one hand, strop in the other, apparently unsure how to employ the two effectively in concert. "Tell me, Byrd, have you any experience at valeting?"

"No, me lord—but I can shave a man." Tom Byrd sedulously avoided looking at Adams, who had discarded the strop and was testing the edge of the razor against the edge of his shoe sole, frowning.

"You can, can you?"

"Yes, me lord. Father's a barber, and us boys'd shave the bristles from the scalded hogs he bought for to make brushes of. For practice, like."

"Hmm." Grey glanced at himself in the looking glass above the chest of drawers. His beard came in only a shade or two darker than his blond hair, but it grew heavily, and the stubble glimmered thick as wheat straw on his jaw in the morning light. No, he really couldn't forgo shaving.

"All right," he said with resignation. "Adams—give the razor to Tom here, if you please. Then go and brush my oldest uniform, and tell the coachman I shall require him. Mr. Byrd and I are going to view a body."

A night lying in the water at Puddle Dock and two days lying in a

shed behind Bow Street compter had not improved Timothy O'Connell's appearance, never his strongest point to begin with. At that, he was at least still recognizable—more than could be said for the gentleman lying on a bit of canvas by the wall, who had apparently hanged himself.

"Turn him over, if you please," Grey said tersely, speaking through a handkerchief soaked with oil of wintergreen, which he held against the lower half of his face.

The two prisoners deputed to accompany him to this makeshift morgue looked rebellious—they had already been obliged to take O'Connell from his cheap coffin and remove his shroud for Grey's inspection—but a gruff word from the constable in charge propelled them into reluctant action.

The corpse had been roughly cleansed, at least. The marks of his last battle were clear, even though the body was bloated and the skin extensively discolored.

Grey bent closer, handkerchief firmly clasped to his face, to inspect the bruises across the back. He beckoned to Tom Byrd, who was standing pressed against the wall of the shed, his freckles dark against the paleness of his face.

"See that?" He pointed to the black mottling over the corpse's back and buttocks. "He was kicked and trampled upon, I think."

"Yes, sir?" Byrd said faintly.

"Yes. But you see how the skin is completely discolored upon the dorsal aspect?"

Byrd gave him a look indicating that he saw nothing whatever, including a reason for his own existence.

"His back," Grey amended. "Dorsum is the Latin word for back."

"Oh, aye," Byrd said, intelligence returning. "I see it plain, me lord."

"That means that he lay upon his back for some time after death. I have seen men taken up from a battlefield for burial; the portions that have lain bottom-most are always discolored in that way."

Byrd nodded, looking faintly ill.

"But you found him upon his face in the water, is that correct?" Grey turned to the constable.

"Yes, my lord. The coroner's seen him," the man added helpfully. "Death by violence."

"Quite," Grey said. "There was no grievous wound upon the front of his body that might have caused his death, and I see no such wound here, do you, Byrd? Not stabbed, not shot, not choked with a garrote ..."

Byrd swayed slightly, but caught himself, and was heard to mutter something about "... head, mebbe?"

"Perhaps. Here, take this." Grey shoved the handkerchief into Byrd's clammy hand, then turned and, holding his breath, gingerly began to feel about in O'Connell's hair. He was interested to see that an inexpert attempt had been made to do up the corpse's hair in a proper military queue, wrapped round a pad of lamb's wool and bound with a leather lacing, though whoever had done it had lacked the rice powder for a finishing touch. Someone who cared had laid the body out—not Mrs. O'Connell, he thought, but someone.

The scalp had begun to loosen, and shifted unpleasantly under his probing fingers. There were assorted lumps, presumably left by kicks or blows ... yes, there. And there. In two places, the bone of the skull gave inward in a sickening manner, and a slight ooze moistened Grey's fingertips.

Byrd made a small choking sound as Grey withdrew his hand, and blundered out, handkerchief still clasped to his face.

"Was he wearing his uniform when he was found?" Grey asked the constable. Deprived of his handkerchief, he wiped his fingers fastidiously on the shroud as he nodded to the two prisoners to restore the corpse to its original state.

"Nah, sir." The constable shook his head. "Stripped to his shirt. We knew as he was one of yours, though, from his hair, and askin' about a bit, we found someone as knew his name and regiment."

Grey's ears pricked up at that.

"Do you mean to say that he was known in the neighborhood where he was found?"

The constable frowned.

"I s'pose so," he said, rubbing at his chin to assist thought. "Let me think ... yes, sir, I'm sure as that's right. When we pulled him out o' the water, and I saw as how he was a soldier, I went round to the Oak and Oyster to inquire, that bein' the nearest place where the soldiers mostly go. Brought a few of the folk in there along to have a look at him; as I recall, 'twas the barmaid from the Oyster what knew him."

The body had been turned over, and one of the prisoners, lips pressed tight against the smell, was drawing up the shroud again, when Grey stopped him with a motion. He bent over the coffin, frowning, and traced the mark on O'Connell's forehead. It was indeed a heelprint, distinctly indented on the livid flesh. He could count the nailheads.

He nodded to himself and straightened up. The body had been moved, so much was plain. But from where? If the Sergeant had been killed in a brawl, as appeared to be the case, perhaps there would have been a report of such an occurrence.

"Might I have a word with your superior, sir?"

"That'd be Constable Magruder, sir—round the front, room on the left. Will you be done with the corpse, sir?" He was already motioning for the two sullen prisoners to restore O'Connell's wrappings and nail down the coffin lid.

"Oh ... yes. I think so." Grey paused, considering. Ought he perhaps to make some ceremonial gesture of farewell to a comrade in arms? There was nothing in that blank and swollen countenance, though, that seemed to invite such a gesture, and surely the constable did not care. In the end, he gave a slight nod to the corpse, a shilling to the constable for his trouble, and left.

Constable Magruder was a small, foxy-looking man, with narrow eyes that darted constantly from doorway to desk and back again, lest anything escape his notice. Grey took some encouragement from this, hoping that few things *did* escape the constable of the day and the Bow Street Runners under his purview.

The constable knew Grey's errand; he saw the wariness lurking at the back of the narrow eyes—and the quick flick of a glance toward the magistrate's offices next door. It was apparent that he feared Grey might go to the magistrate, Sir John Fielding, with all the consequent trouble this might involve.

Grey did not know Sir John himself, but was reasonably sure that his mother did. Still, at this point, there was no need to invoke him. Realizing what was in Magruder's mind, Grey did his best to show an attitude of relaxed affability and humble gratitude for the constable's continued assistance.

"I thank you, sir, for your gracious accommodation. I hesitate to intrude further on your generosity—but if I might ask just one or two questions?"

"Oh, aye, sir." Magruder went on looking wary, but relaxed a little, relieved that he was not about to be asked to conduct a time-

consuming and probably futile investigation.

"I understand that Sergeant O'Connell was likely killed on Saturday night. Are you aware of any disturbances taking place in the neighborhood on that night?"

Magruder's face twitched.

"Disturbances, Major? The whole place is a disturbance come nightfall, sir. Robbery from the person, purse-cutting, fights and street riots, disagreements betwixt whores and their customers, burglary of premises, theft, tavern brawls, malicious mischief, fire-setting, horse-stealing, housebreaking, random assaults ..."

"Yes, I see. Still, we are reasonably sure that no one set Sergeant O'Connell on fire, nor yet mistook him for a lady of the evening." Grey smiled to abjure any suspicions of sarcasm. "I am only seeking to narrow the possibilities, you see, sir." He spread his hands, deprecatingly. "My duty, you understand."

"Oh, aye." Magruder was not without humor; a small gleam of it lit the narrow eyes and softened the harsh outlines of his face. He glanced from the papers on his desk to the hallway, down which echoed shouts and bangings from the prisoners in the rear, then back to Grey.

"I'll have to speak to the constable of the night, go through the reports. If I see anything that might be helpful to your inquiry, Major, I'll send round a note, shall I?"

"I should appreciate it very much, sir." Grey rose promptly, and the two men parted with mutual expressions of esteem.

Tom Byrd was sitting on the pavement outside, still pale, but improved. He sprang to his feet at Grey's gesture, and fell into step behind him.

Would Magruder produce anything helpful? Grey wondered. There were so many possibilities. Robbery from the person, Magruder had suggested. Perhaps ... but knowing what he did of O'Connell's ferocious temperament, Grey was not inclined to think that a gang of robbers would have chosen him at random—there were easier sheep to fleece, by far.

But what if O'Connell had succeeded in meeting the spymaster—if there was one, Grey reminded himself—and had turned over his documents and received a sum of money?

He considered the possibility that the spymaster had then murdered O'Connell to retrieve his money or silence a risk—but in that case, why not simply kill O'Connell and take the documents in the first

place? Well ... if O'Connell had been wise enough not to carry the documents on his person, and the spymaster knew it, he would presumably have taken care to obtain the goods before taking any subsequent steps in disposing of the messenger.

By the same token, though, if someone else had discovered that O'Connell was in possession of a sum of money, they might have killed him in the process of a robbery that had nothing to do with the stolen requisitions. But the amount of damage done to the body ... that suggested whoever had done the deed had meant to make sure that O'Connell was dead. Casual robbers would not have cared; they would have knocked O'Connell on the head and absconded, completely careless of whether he lived or died.

A spymaster might make certain of the matter. And yet—would a spymaster depend upon the services of associates? For clearly, O'Connell had faced more than one assailant—and from the condition of his hands, had left his mark on them.

"What do you think, Tom?" he said, more by way of clarifying his thoughts than because he desired Byrd's opinion. "If secrecy were a concern, would it not be more sensible to use a weapon? Beating a man to death is likely to be a noisy business. Attract a lot of unwelcome attention, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, me lord. I expect that's so. Though so far as that goes ..."

"Yes?" He glanced round at Byrd, who hastened his step a bit to come level with Grey.

"Well, it's only—mind, I ain't—haven't, I mean—seen a man beat to death. But when you go to kill a pig, you only get a terrible lot of screeching if you've done it wrong."

"Done it wrong?"

"Yes, me lord. If you do it right, it doesn't take but one good blow. The pig doesn't know what hit 'im, and there's no noise to speak of. You get a man what doesn't know what he's doing, or isn't strong enough—" Byrd made a face at the thought of such incompetence. "Racket like to wake the dead. There's a butcher's across the street from me dad's shop," he offered in explanation. "I've seen pigs killed often."

"A very good point, Tom," Grey said slowly. If either robbery or simple murder was the intent, it could have been accomplished with much less fuss. Ergo, whatever had befallen Tim O'Connell had likely been an accident, in a brawl or street riot, or ... and yet the body had been moved, sometime after death. Why?

His cogitations were interrupted by the sound of an agitated altercation in the alleyway that led to the back of the gaol.

"What're you doing here, you Irish whore?"

"I've a right to be here—unlike you, ye draggletail thief!"

"Cunt!"

"Bitch!"

Following the sound of strife into the alley, Grey found Timothy O'Connell's sealed coffin lying in the roadway, surrounded by people. In the center of the mob was the pregnant figure of Mrs. O'Connell, swathed in a black shawl and squared off against another woman, similarly attired.

The ladies were not alone, he saw; Scanlon the apothecary was vainly trying to persuade Mrs. O'Connell away from her opponent, with the aid of a tall, rawboned Irishman. The second lady had also brought reinforcement, in the person of a small, fat clergyman, dressed in dog collar and rusty coat, who appeared more entertained than distressed by the exchange of cordialities. A number of other people crowded the alley behind both women—mourners, presumably, come to assist in the burial of Sergeant O'Connell.

"Take your wicked friends and be off with ye! He was my husband, not yours!"

"Oh, and a fine wife *you* were, I'm sure! Didn't care enough to come and wash the mud from his face when they dragged him out of the ditch! It was me laid him out proper, and me that'll bury him, thank you very much! Wife! Ha!"

Tom Byrd stood open-mouthed under the eaves of the shed, watching. He glanced up wide-eyed at Grey.

"And it's me paid for his coffin—think I'll let you take it? Likely you'll give the body to a knacker's shop and sell the box, greedy-guts! Take a man from his wife so you can suck the marrow from his bones "

"Shut your trap!"

"Shut yours!" bellowed the widow O'Connell, and she took a wild swing at the other woman, who dodged adroitly. Seeing a sudden surge among the mourners on both sides, Grey pushed his way between the women.

"Madam," he began, grasping Mrs. O'Connell's arm with determination. "You must—" His admonition was interrupted by a swift elbow in the pit of the stomach, which took him quite by surprise. He staggered back a pace, and stamped inadvertently on the

toe of the tall Irishman, who hopped to and fro on one foot, uttering brief blasphemies in what Grey assumed to be the Irish tongue, as it was no form of French.

These were rapidly subsumed by the blasphemies being flung by the two ladies—if that was the word, Grey thought grimly—in an incoherent barrage of insults.

The pistol-shot sound of a slapped cheek rang out, and then the alley erupted in high-pitched shrieks as the women closed with each other, fingers clawed and feet kicking. Grey grabbed for the other woman's sleeve, but it was torn from his grip and he was knocked heavily into a wall. Someone tripped him, and he went down, rolling and rebounding from the wall of the shed before he could get his feet under him.

Regaining his balance, Grey staggered, then landed on the balls of his feet, and snatched out his sword in a slashing arc that made the metal sing. The thin chime of it cut through the racket in the alleyway like a knife through butter, separating the combatants and sending the women stumbling back from each other. In the moment's silence that resulted, Grey stepped firmly between the two women and glared back and forth between them.

Assured that he had put at least a momentary stop to the battle, he turned to the unknown woman. A solid person with curly black hair, she wore a wide-brimmed hat that obscured her face, but not her attitude, which was belligerent in the extreme.

"May I inquire your name, madam? And your purpose here?"

"She's a class of a slut, what else?" Mrs. O'Connell's voice came from behind him, cracked with contempt, but controlled. Silencing the other woman's heated response to this with a peremptory movement of his sword, he cast an irritated glance over his shoulder.

"I asked the lady herself—if you please, Mrs. O'Connell."

"That would be Mrs. Scanlon—if *you* please, my lord." The apothecary's voice was more than polite, but held a note almost of smugness.

"I beg your pardon?" Taken by surprise, he turned completely round to face Scanlon and the widow. Evidently, the other woman was equally shocked, for beyond a loud "What?" behind him, she said nothing.

Scanlon was holding Francine O'Connell by the arm; he tightened his grasp a little and bowed to Grey.

"I have the honor to introduce you to my wife, sir," he said gravely.

"Wed yestereen we were, by special license, with Father Doyle himself doing of the honors." He nodded at the tall Irishman, who nodded in turn, though keeping a wary eye on the tip of Grey's rapier.

"What, couldn't wait 'til poor old Tim was cold, could you? And who's the slut here, I'd like to know, you with your belly swole up like a farkin' toad!"

"I'm a married woman—twice married! And you with no name and no shame—"

"Ah, now, Francie, Francie ..." Scanlon put his arms around his incensed wife, lugging her back by main force. "Let it be, sweetheart, let it be. Ye don't want to be doing the babe an injury now, do ye?"

At this reminder of her delicate condition, Francine desisted, though she went on huffing beneath her hat brim, much in the manner of a bull who has chased intruders out of a field and means to see that they stay chased.

Grey turned back to the other woman, just as she opened her mouth again. He put the tip of his rapier firmly against the middle of her chest, cutting her expostulations short and eliciting a brief and startled "Eek!"

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded, patience exhausted.

"Iphigenia Stokes," she replied indignantly. "How dare you be takin' liberties with me person, you?" She backed up a step, swatting at his sword with a hand whose essential broadness and redness was not disguised by the black shammy mitt covering it.

"And who are *you*?" Grey swung toward the small clergyman, who had been tranquilly enjoying the show from a place of security behind a barrel.

"Me?" The clerical gentleman looked surprised, but bowed obligingly. "The Reverend Mr. Cobb, sir, curate of St. Giles. I was asked to come and deliver the obsequies for the late Mr. O'Connell, on behalf of Miss Stokes, whom I understand to have had a personal friendship with the deceased."

"You what? A frigging Protestant?" Francine O'Connell Scanlon stood straight upright, trembling with renewed outrage. Mr. Cobb eyed her warily, but seemed to feel himself safe enough in his retreat, for he bowed politely to her.

"Interment is to be in the churchyard at St. Giles, ma'am—if you and your husband would care to attend?"

At this, the entire Irish contingent pressed forward, obviously intending to seize the casket and carry it off by main force. Nothing

daunted, Miss Stokes's escort likewise pushed eagerly to the fore, several of the gentlemen uprooting boards from a sagging fence to serve as makeshift clubs.

Miss Stokes was encouraging her troops with bellows of "Catholic whore!" while Mr. Scanlon appeared to be of two minds in the matter, simultaneously dragging his wife out of the fray while shaking his free fist in the direction of the Protestants and shouting assorted Irish imprecations.

With visions of bloody riot breaking out, Grey leapt atop the casket and swung his sword viciously from side to side, driving back all comers.

"Tom!" he shouted. "Go for the constables!"

Tom Byrd had not waited for instructions, but had apparently gone for reinforcements during the earlier part of the affray; the word "constables" was barely out of Grey's mouth, when the sound of running feet came down the street. Constable Magruder and a pair of his men charged into the alley, clubs and pistols at the ready, with Tom Byrd bringing up the rear, panting.

Seeing the arrival of armed authority, the warring funeral parties drew instantly apart, knives disappearing like magic and clubs dropping to the ground with insouciant casualness.

"Are you in difficulties, Major?" Constable Magruder called, looking distinctly entertained as he glanced between the two competing widows and then up at Grey on his precarious roost.

"No, sir ... I thank you," Grey replied politely, gasping for breath. He felt the cheap boards of the coffin creak in a sinister fashion as he shifted his weight, and sweat ran down the groove of his back. "If you would care to go on standing there for just a moment longer, though?..."

He drew a deep breath and stepped gingerly down from his perch. He had rolled through a puddle; the seat of his breeches was wet, and he could feel the split where the sleeve seam beneath his right arm had given way. Goddamn it, now what?

He was inclined toward the simplicity of a Solomonic decree that would award half of Tim O'Connell to each woman, and rejected this notion only because of the time it would take and the fact that his rapier was completely unsuited to the task of such division. If the widows gave him any further difficulties, though, he was sending Tom to fetch a butcher's cleaver upon the instant, he swore it.

Grey sighed, sheathed his sword, and rubbed the spot between his

brows with an index finger.

"Mrs.... Scanlon."

"Aye?" The swelling of her face had gone down somewhat; it was suspicion and fury now that narrowed those diamond eyes of hers.

"When I called upon you two days ago, you rejected the gift presented by your husband's comrades in arms, on the grounds that you believed your husband to be in hell and did not wish to waste money upon Masses and candles. Is that not so?"

"It is," she said, reluctantly. "But—"

"Well, then. If you believe him presently to be occupying the infernal regions," Grey pointed out, "that is clearly a permanent condition. The act of having his body interred in a particular location, or with Catholic ritual, will not alter his unfortunate destiny."

"Now, we can't be knowing for certain as a sinner's soul has gone to hell," the priest objected, suddenly seeing the prospects of a fee for burying O'Connell receding. "God's ways are beyond the ken of us poor men, and for all any of us knows, poor Tim O'Connell repented of his wickedness at the last, made a perfect Act of Contrition, and was taken straight up to paradise in the arms of the angels!"

"Excellent." Grey leapt on this incautious speculation like a leopard on its prey. "If he is in paradise, he is still less in need of earthly intervention. So"—he bowed punctiliously to the Scanlons and their priest—"according to you, the deceased may be either damned or saved, but is surely in one of those two conditions. Whereas *you*"—he turned to Miss Stokes—"are of the opinion that Tim O'Connell is perhaps in some intermediate state where intercessory actions might be efficacious?"

Miss Stokes regarded him for a moment, her mouth hanging slightly open.

"I just want 'im buried proper," she said, sounding suddenly meek. "Sir."

"Well, then. I consider that you, madam"—he shot a sharp look at the new Mrs. Scanlon—"have to some degree forfeited your legal rights in the matter, being now married to Mr. Scanlon. If Miss Stokes were to reimburse you for the cost of the coffin, would you find that acceptable?"

Grey eyed the Irish contingent, and found them dour-faced but silent. Scanlon glanced at the priest, then at his wife, then finally at Grey, and nodded, very slightly.

"Take him," Grey said to Miss Stokes, stepping back with a brief

gesture toward the coffin.

He strode purposefully toward Scanlon, hand on the hilt of his sword, but while there was a certain amount of shuffling, muttering, and spitting in the ranks, none of the Irish seemed disposed to offer more than the occasional murmured insult as Miss Stokes's minions took possession of the disputed remains.

"May I offer my felicitations on your marriage, sir?" he said politely.

"I am obliged to ye, sir," Scanlon said, equally polite. Francine stood by his side, simmering beneath her large black hat.

They stood silent then, all watching as Tim O'Connell was borne away. Iphigenia Stokes was surprisingly gracious in triumph, Grey thought; she cast neither glance nor remark toward the defeated Irish, and her attendants followed her lead, moving in silence to pick up the coffin. Miss Stokes took up her place as chief mourner, and the small procession moved off. At the last, the Reverend Mr. Cobb risked a brief glance back and a tiny wave of the hand toward Grey.

"God rest his soul," Father Doyle said piously, crossing himself as the coffin disappeared down the alley.

"God rot him," said Francine O'Connell Scanlon. She turned her head and spat neatly on the ground. "And her."

It was not yet noon, and the taverns were still largely empty. Constable Magruder and his assistants graciously accepted a quantity of drink in the Blue Swan in reward of their help, and then returned to their duties, leaving Grey to shuck his coat and attempt repairs to his wardrobe in a modicum of privacy.

"It seems you're a handy fellow with a needle as well as a razor, Tom." Grey slouched comfortably on a bench in the tavern's deserted snug, restoring himself with a second pint of stout. "To say nothing of quick with both wits and feet. If you'd not gone for Magruder when you did, I'd likely be laid out in the alley now, cold as yesterday's turbot."

Tom Byrd squinted over the red coat he was mending by the imperfect light from a leaded-glass window. He didn't look up from his work, but a small glow of gratification appeared to spread itself across his snub features.

"Well, I could see as how you had the matter well in hand, me

lord," he said tactfully, "but there was a dreadful lot of them Irish, to say nothin' of the Frenchies."

"Frenchies?" Grey put a fist to his mouth to stifle a rising eructation. "What, you thought Miss Stokes's friends were French? Why?"

Byrd looked up, surprised.

"Why, they was speakin' French to each other—at least a couple of them. Two black-browed coves, curly-haired, what looked as if they was related to that Miss Stokes."

Grey was surprised in turn, and furrowed his brow in concentration, trying to recall any remarks that might have been made in French during the recent contretemps, but failing. He had marked out the two swarthy persons described by Tom, who had squared up behind their —sister, cousin? for surely Tom was right; there was an undeniable resemblance—in menacing fashion, but they had looked more like—

"Oh," he said, struck by a thought. "Did it sound perhaps a bit like this?" He recited a brief verse from Homer, doing his best to infuse it with a crude English accent.

Tom's face lighted and he nodded vigorously, the end of the thread in his mouth.

"I did wonder where she'd got Iphigenia," Grey said, smiling. "Shouldn't think her father was a scholar of the classics, after all. It's Greek, Tom," he clarified, seeing his young valet frown in incomprehension. "Likely Miss Stokes and her brothers—if that's what they are—have a Greek mother or grandmother, for I'm sure Stokes is home-grown enough."

"Oh, Greek," Tom said uncertainly, obviously unclear on the distinctions between this and any other form of French. "To be sure, me lord." He delicately removed a bit of thread stuck to his lip, and shook out the folds of the coat. "Here, me lord; I won't say as it's good as new, but you can at least be wearing it without the lining peepin' out."

Grey nodded in thanks, and pushed a full mug of beer in Tom's direction. He shrugged himself carefully into the mended coat, inspecting the torn seam. It was scarcely tailor's work, but the repair looked stout enough.

He wondered whether Iphigenia Stokes might repay closer inspection; if she *did* have family ties to France, it would suggest both a motive for O'Connell's treachery—if he had been a traitor—and an avenue by which he might have disposed of the Calais information.

But Greek ... that argued for Stokes *Père* having been a sailor, perhaps. Likely merchant seaman rather than naval, if he'd brought home a foreign wife.

Yes, he rather thought the Stokes family would bear looking into. Seafaring ran in families, and while his observations had necessarily been cursory under the circumstances, he thought that one or two of the men in the Stokes party had looked like sailors; one had had a gold ring in his ear, he was sure. And sailors would be well-placed for smuggling information out of Britain, though in that case—

"Me lord?"

"Yes, Tom?" He frowned slightly at the interruption to his thoughts, but answered courteously.

"It's only I was thinking ... seeing the dead cove, I mean—"

"Sergeant O'Connell, you mean?" Grey amended, not liking to hear a late comrade in arms referred to carelessly as "the dead cove," traitor or not.

"Yes, me lord." Tom took a deep swallow of his beer, then looked up, meeting Grey's eyes directly. "Do you think me brother's dead, too?"

That brought him up short. He readjusted the coat on his shoulders, thinking what to say. In fact, he did not think Jack Byrd was dead; he agreed with Harry Quarry that the fellow had probably either joined forces with whoever had killed O'Connell—or had killed the Sergeant himself. Neither speculation was likely to be reassuring to Jack Byrd's brother, though.

"No," he said slowly. "I do not. If he had been killed by the persons who brought about Sergeant O'Connell's death, I think his body would have been discovered nearby. There could be no particular reason to hide it, do you think?"

The boy's rigid shoulders relaxed a little, and he shook his head, taking another gulp of his beer.

"No, me lord." He wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand. "Only—if he's not dead, where do ye think he might be?"

"I don't know," Grey answered honestly. "I am hoping we shall discover that soon." It occurred to him that if Jack Byrd had not yet left London, his brother might be a help in determining his whereabouts, witting or not.

"Can you think of places where your brother might go? If he was—frightened, perhaps? Or felt himself to be in danger?"

Tom Byrd shot him a sharp look, and he realized that the boy was a

good deal more intelligent than he had at first assumed.

"No, me lord. If he needed help—well, there's six of us boys and Dad, and me father's two brothers and their boys, too; we takes care of our own. But he's not been home; I know that much."

"Quite a thriving rookery of Byrds, it seems. You've spoken to your family, then?" Grey felt gingerly beneath the skirts of his coat; finding his breeches mostly dried, he sat down again opposite Byrd.

"Yes, me lord. Me sister—there's only the one of her—come to Mr. Trevelyan's on Sunday last, a-looking for Jack with a message. That was when Mr. Trevelyan said he'd not heard from Jack since the night before Mr. O'Connell died."

The boy shook his head.

"If it happened Jack ran into summat too much for him, that Dad and us couldn't handle, he would have gone to Mr. Trevelyan, I think. But he didn't do that. If something happened, I think it must've been sudden, like."

A clatter in the passageway announced the return of the barmaid, and prevented Grey answering—which was as well, since he had no useful suggestion to offer.

"Are you hungry, Tom?" The tray of fresh pasties the woman carried were hot and doubtless savory enough, but Grey's nose was still numbed with oil of wintergreen, and the memory of O'Connell's corpse fresh enough in mind to suppress his appetite.

The same appeared true of Byrd, for he shook his head emphatically.

"Well, then. Give the lady back her needle—and a bit for her kindness—and we'll be off."

Grey had not kept the coach, and so they walked back toward Bow Street, where they might find transport. Byrd slouched along, a little behind Grey, kicking at pebbles; obviously thoughts of his brother were weighing on his mind.

"Was your brother accustomed to report back to Mr. Trevelyan regularly?" Grey asked, glancing over his shoulder. "Whilst watching Sergeant O'Connell, I mean?"

Tom shrugged, looking unhappy.

"Dunno, me lord. Jack didn't say what it was he was up to; only that it was a special thing Mr. Joseph wanted him to do, and that was why he wouldn't be in the house for a bit."

"But you know now? What he was doing, and why?"

An expression of wariness flitted through the boy's eyes.

"No, me lord. Mr. Trevelyan only said as I should help you. He didn't say specially what with."

"I see." Grey wondered how much of the situation to impart. It was the anxious look on Tom Byrd's face, as much as anything else, that decided him on full disclosure. Full, that is, bar the precise nature of O'Connell's suspected peculations and Grey's private conjectures regarding the role of Jack Byrd in the matter.

"So you don't think the dead—Sergeant O'Connell, I mean—you don't think he was just knocked on the head by accident, like, me lord?" Byrd had come out of his mope; the clammy look had left his cheeks, and he was walking briskly now, engrossed in the details of Grey's account.

"Well, you see, Tom, I still cannot say so with any certainty. I was hoping that perhaps we should discover some particular mark upon the body that would make it clear that someone had deliberately set out to murder Sergeant O'Connell, and I found nothing of that nature. On the other hand ..."

"On the other hand, whoever stamped on his face didn't like him much," Tom completed the thought shrewdly. "*That* was no accident, me lord."

"No, it wasn't," Grey agreed dryly. "That was done after death, not in the frenzy of the moment."

Tom's eyes went quite round.

"However do you know that? Me lord," he added hastily.

"You looked closely at the heelprint? Several of the nailheads had broken through the skin, and yet there was no blood extravasated."

Tom gave him a look of mingled bewilderment and suspicion, obviously suspecting that Grey had made up the word upon the moment for the express purpose of tormenting him, but merely said, "Oh?"

"Oh, indeed." Grey felt some slight chagrin at having inadvertently shown up the deficiencies of Tom's vocabulary, but didn't wish to make further issue of the point by apologizing.

"Dead men don't bleed, you see—save they have suffered some grievous wound, such as the loss of a limb, and are picked up soon after. Then you will see some dripping, of course, but the blood soon thickens as it chills, and—" Seeing the pallid look reappear on Tom's face, he coughed, and resumed upon another tack.

"No doubt you are thinking that the nail marks might have bled, but the blood had been cleansed away?" "Oh. Um ... yes," Tom said faintly.

"Possible," Grey conceded, "but not likely. Wounds to the head bleed inordinately—like a stuck pig, as the saying is."

"Whoever says it hasn't likely seen a stuck pig," Tom said, rallying stoutly. "I have. Floods of it, there is. Enough to fill a barrel—or two!"

Grey nodded, noting that it was clearly not the notion of blood per se that was disturbing the lad.

"Yes, that's the way of it. I looked very carefully and found no dried blood in the corpse's hair or on the skin of the face—though the cleansing appeared otherwise to be rather crude. So no, I am fairly sure the mark was made some little time after the Sergeant had ceased to breathe."

"Well, it wasn't Jack what made it!"

Grey glanced at him, startled. Well, now he knew what was disturbing the boy; beyond simple worry at his brother's absence, Tom clearly feared that Jack Byrd might be guilty of murder—or at least suspected of it.

"I did not suggest that he did," he replied carefully.

"But I know he didn't! I can prove it, me lord!" Byrd grasped him by the sleeve, carried away by the passion of his speech.

"Jack's shoes have square heels, me lord! Whoever stamped the dead cove had round ones! Wooden ones, too, and Jack's shoes have leather heels!"

He paused, almost panting in his excitement, searching Grey's face with wide eyes, anxious for any sign of agreement.

"I see," Grey said slowly. The boy was still gripping his arm. He put his own hand over the boy's and squeezed lightly. "I am glad to hear it, Tom. Very glad."

Byrd searched his face a moment longer, then evidently found what he had been seeking, for he drew a deep breath and let go of Grey's sleeve with a shaky nod.

They reached Bow Street a few moments later, and Grey waved an arm to summon a carriage, glad of the excuse to discontinue the conversation. For while he was sure that Tom was telling the truth regarding his brother's shoes, one fact remained: The disappearance of Jack Byrd was still the main reason for presuming that O'Connell's death had been no accident.

Harry Quarry was eating supper at his desk while doing paperwork, but put aside both plate and papers to listen to Grey's account of Sergeant O'Connell's dramatic departure.

"'How dare you be takin' liberties with me person, you?' She really said that?" He wheezed, wiping tears of amusement from the corners of his eyes. "Christ, Johnny, you've had a more entertaining day than I have, by a long shot!"

"You are quite welcome to resume the personal aspects of this investigation at any moment," Grey assured him, leaning over to pluck a radish from the ravaged remains of Quarry's meal. He had had no food since breakfast, and was ravenous. "I won't mind at all."

"No, no," Quarry reassured him. "Wouldn't dream of deprivin' you of the opportunity. What d'ye make of Scanlon and the widow, coming to bury O'Connell like that?"

Grey shrugged, chewing the radish as he brushed flecks of dried mud from the skirts of his coat.

"He'd just married O'Connell's widow, mere days after the sergeant was killed. I suppose he meant to deflect suspicion, assuming that people would scarce suspect him of having killed the man if he had the face to show up looking pious and paying for the funeral, complete with priest and trimmings."

"Mm." Quarry nodded, picking up a stalk of buttered asparagus and inserting it whole into his mouth. "Geddaluk t'shus?"

"Scanlon's shoes? No, I hadn't the opportunity, what with those two harpies trying to murder each other. Stubbs did look at his hands, though, when we were round at his shop. If Scanlon did for O'Connell, someone else did the heavy work."

"D'you think he did it?"

"God knows. Are you going to eat that muffin?"

"Yes," Quarry said, biting into it. Consuming the muffin in two large bites, he tilted back in his chair, squinting at the plate in hopes of discovering something else edible.

"So, this new valet of yours says his brother can't have done it? Well, he would, wouldn't he?"

"Perhaps so—but the same argument obtains as for Scanlon; it took more than one person to kill O'Connell. So far as we know, Jack Byrd was quite alone—and I can't envision a mere footman by himself doing what was done to Tim O'Connell."

Failing to find anything more substantial, Quarry broke a gnawed chicken bone in two and sucked out the marrow.

"So," he summed up, licking his fingers, "what it comes down to is that O'Connell was killed by two or more men, after which someone stamped on his face, then left him to lie for a bit. Sometime later, someone—whether the same someone who killed him, or someone else—picked him up and dropped him into the Fleet Ditch off Puddle Dock."

"That's it. I asked the constable in charge to look through his reports, to see whether there was any fighting reported anywhere on the night O'Connell died. Beyond that—" Grey rubbed his forehead, fighting weariness. "We should look closely at Iphigenia Stokes and her family, I think."

"You don't suppose she did it, do you? Woman scorned and all that —and she has got the sailor brothers. Sailors all wear wooden heels; leather's slippery on deck."

Grey looked at him, surprised.

"However do you come to know that, Harry?"

"Sailed from Edinburgh to France in a new pair of leather-heeled shoes once," Quarry said, picking up a lettuce leaf and peering hopefully beneath it. "Squalls all the way, and nearly broke me leg six times."

Grey plucked the lettuce leaf out of Quarry's hand and ate it.

"An excellent point," he said, swallowing. "And it would account for the apparent personal animosity evident in the crime. But no, I cannot think Miss Stokes had the Sergeant murdered. Scanlon might easily maintain a pose of pious concern for the purpose of disarming suspicion—but not she. She was entirely sincere in her desire to see O'Connell decently buried; I am sure of it."

"Mm." Quarry rubbed thoughtfully at the scar on his cheek. "Perhaps. Might her male relations have discovered that O'Connell had a wife, though, and done him in for honor's sake? They might not have told her what they'd done, if so."

"Hadn't thought of that," Grey admitted. He examined the notion, finding it appealing on several grounds. It would explain the physical circumstances of the Sergeant's death very nicely; not only the battering, done by multiple persons, but the viciousness of the heelprint—and if the killing had been done in or near Miss Stokes's residence, then there was plainly a need to dispose of the body at a safe distance, which would explain its having been moved after death.

"It's not a bad idea at all, Harry. May I have Stubbs, Calvert, and Jowett, then, to help with the inquiries?"

"Take anyone you like. And you'll keep looking for Jack Byrd, of course."

"Yes." Grey dipped a forefinger into the small puddle of sauce that was the only thing remaining on the plate, and sucked it clean. "I doubt there's much to be gained by troubling the Scanlons further, but I wouldn't mind knowing a bit about his close associates, and where they might have been on Saturday night. Last but not least—what about this hypothetical spymaster?"

Quarry blew out his cheeks and heaved a deep sigh.

"I've something in train there—tell you later, if anything comes of it. Meanwhile"—he pushed back his chair and rose, brushing crumbs from his waistcoat—"I've got a dinner party to go to."

"Sure you haven't spoiled your appetite?" Grey asked, bitingly.

"Ha-ha," Quarry said, clapping his wig on his head and bending to peer into the looking glass he kept on the wall near his desk. "Surely you don't think one gets anything to *eat* at a dinner party?"

"That was my impression, yes. I am mistaken?"

"Well, you do," Quarry admitted, "but not for hours. Nothing but sips of wine and bits of toast with capers on before dinner—wouldn't keep a bird alive."

"What sort of bird?" Grey said, eyeing Quarry's muscular but substantial hindquarters. "A great bustard?"

"Care to come along?" Quarry straightened and shrugged on his coat. "Not too late, you know."

"I thank you, no." Grey rose and stretched, feeling every bone in his back creak with the effort. "I'm going home, before I starve to death."



Chapter 5

Eine Kleine Nachtmusik (A Little Night Music)

It was well past dark when Grey returned to his mother's house in Jermyn Street. In spite of his hunger, he was deliberately late, having no desire to face either his mother or Olivia before he had decided upon a course of action with regard to Joseph Trevelyan.

Not late enough, though. To his dismay, he saw light blazing through all the windows and a liveried footman standing by the portico, obviously there to admit invited guests and repel those unwanted. A voice within was upraised in some sort of song, accompanied by the sounds of flute and harpsichord.

"Oh, God. It isn't Wednesday, is it, Hardy?" he pleaded, ascending the steps toward the footman, who smiled at sight of him, bowing as he opened the door.

"Yes, my lord. Has been all day, I'm afraid."

Normally, he rather enjoyed his mother's weekly musicales. However, he was in no condition to be sociable at the moment. He ought to go and spend the night at the Beefsteak—but that meant an arduous journey back across London, and he was perished with hunger.

"I'll just slip through to the kitchen," he said to Hardy. "Don't tell the Countess I'm here."

"No indeed, my lord."

He stole soft-footed into the foyer, pausing for a moment to judge the terrain. Because of the warm weather, the double doors into the main drawing room stood open, to prevent the occupants being suffocated. The music, a lugubrious German duet with a refrain of "Den Tod"—"O Death"—would drown the noise of his footsteps, but he would be in plain view for the second or two required to sprint across the foyer and into the hall that led to the kitchens.

He swallowed, mouth watering heavily at the scents of roast meat and steamed pudding that wafted toward him from the recesses of the house.

Another of the footmen, Thomas, was visible through the half-open door of the library, across the foyer from the drawing room. The footman's back was turned to the door, and he carried a Hanoverian military helmet, ornately gilded and festooned with an enormous spray of dyed plumes, obviously wondering where to put the ridiculous object.

Grey pressed himself against the wall and eased farther into the foyer. There was a plan. If he could attract Thomas's attention, he could use the footman as a shield to cross the foyer, thus gain the safety of the staircase, and make it to the sanctuary of his own chamber, whilst Thomas went to fetch him a discreet tray from the kitchen.

This plan of escape was foiled, though, by the sudden appearance of his cousin Olivia on the stair above, elegant in amber silk, blond hair gleaming in a lace cap.

"John!" she cried, beaming at sight of him. "There you are! I was so hoping you'd come home in time."

"In time for what?" he asked, with a sense of foreboding.

"To sing, of course." She skipped down the stairs and seized him affectionately by the arm. "We're having a German evening—and you do the lieder so well, Johnny!"

"Flattery will avail you nothing," he said, smiling despite himself. "I can't sing; I'm starving. Besides, it's nearly over, surely?" He nodded at the case clock by the stair, which read a few minutes past eleven. Supper was almost always served at half-past.

"If you'll sing, I'm sure they'll wait to hear you. Then you can eat afterward. Aunt Bennie has the most marvelous collation laid on—the biggest steamed pudding I've ever seen, with juniper berries, and lamb cutlets with spinach, and a coq au vin, and some absolutely disgusting sausages—for the Germans, you know...."

Grey's stomach rumbled loudly at this enticing catalog of gustation. He still would have demurred, though, had he not at this moment caught sight of an elderly woman with a swatch of ostrich plume in her tidy wig, through the open double doors of the drawing room.

The crowd erupted in applause, but as though the lady sensed his start of recognition, she turned her head toward the door, and her face lighted with pleasure as she saw him.

"She's been hoping you'd come," Olivia murmured behind him.

No help for it. With distinctly mixed feelings, he took Olivia's arm and led her down as Hector's mother hastened out of the drawing room to greet him.

"Lady Mumford! Your servant, ma'am." He smiled and bent over her hand, but she would have none of this formality.

"Nonsense, sweetheart," she said, in that warm throaty voice that held echoes of her dead son's. "Come and kiss me properly, there's a good boy."

He straightened and obligingly bussed her cheek. She put her hands on his own cheeks and kissed him soundly on the mouth. The embrace did not recall Hector's kiss to him, thank God, but was sufficiently unnerving for all that.

"You look well, John," Lady Mumford said, stepping back and giving him a searching look with Hector's blue eyes. "Tired, though. A great deal to be done, I expect, with the regiment set to move?"

"A good deal," he agreed, wondering whether all of London knew that the 47th was due to be reposted. Of course, Lady Mumford had spent most of her life close to the regiment; even with husband and son both dead, she maintained a motherly interest.

"India, I heard," Lady Mumford went on, frowning slightly as she fingered the cloth of his uniform sleeve. "Now, you'll have your new uniform ready ordered, I hope? A nice tropical weight of superfine for your coat and weskit, and linen breeches. You don't want to be spending a summer under the Indian sun, swaddled to the neck in English wool! Take it from me, my dear; I went with Mumford when he was posted there, in '35. Both of us nearly died, between the heat, the flies, and the food. Spent a whole summer in me shift, having the servants pour water over me; poor old Wally wasn't so fortunate, sweating about in full uniform, never could get the stains out. Drank nothing but whisky and coconut milk—bear that in mind, dear, when the time comes. Nourishing and stimulating, you know, and so much more wholesome to the stomach than brandywine."

Realizing that he was merely proxy to the true objects of her bereaved affections—the shades of Hector and his father—he withstood this barrage with patience. It was necessary for Lady Mumford to talk, he knew; however, as he had learned from experience, it was not really necessary for him to listen.

He clasped her hand warmly between his own, nodding and making periodical small noises of interest and assent, while taking in the rest of the assembly with brief glances past Lady Mumford's lace-covered shoulders.

Much the usual mix of society and army, with a few oddities from the London literary world. His mother was fond of books, and tended to collect scribblers, who flocked in ragtag hordes to her gatherings, repaying the bounty of her table with ink-splotched manuscripts—and a very occasional printed book—dedicated to her gracious patronage.

Grey looked warily for the tall, cadaverous figure of Doctor Johnson, who was all too apt to take the floor at supper and begin a declamation of some new epic in progress, covering any lacunae of composition with wide, crumb-showering gestures, but the dictionarist was fortunately absent tonight. That was well, Grey thought, spirits momentarily buoyed. He was fond both of Lady Mumford and of music, but a discourse on the etymology of the vulgar tongue was well above the odds, after the day he had been having.

He caught sight of his mother on the far side of the room, keeping an eye on the serving tables while simultaneously conversing with a tall military gentleman—from his uniform, the Hanoverian owner of the plumed excrescence Grey had observed in the library.

Benedicta, Dowager Countess Melton, was several inches shorter than her youngest son, which placed her inconveniently at about the height of the Hanoverian's middle waistcoat button. Stepping back a bit in order to relieve the strain on her neck, she spotted John, and her face lighted with pleasure.

She jerked her head at him, widening her eyes and compressing her lips in an expression of maternal command that said, as plainly as words, *Come and talk to this horrible person so I can see to the other guests!*

Grey responded with a similar grimace, and the faintest of shrugs, indicating that the demands of civility bound him to his present location for the moment.

His mother rolled her eyes upward in exasperation, then glanced hastily round for another scapegoat. Following the direction of her minatory gaze, he saw that it had lighted on Olivia, who, correctly interpreting her aunt's Jove-like command, left her companion with a word, coming obediently to the Countess's rescue.

"Wait and have your smallclothes made in India, though," Lady Mumford was instructing him. "You can get cotton in Bombay at a fraction of the London price, and the sheer luxury of cotton next the skin, my dear, particularly when one is sweating freely ... You wouldn't want to get a nasty rash, you know."

"No, indeed not," he murmured, though he scarcely attended to what he was saying. For at this inauspicious moment, his eye lit upon the companion that his cousin had just abandoned—a gentleman in green brocade and powdered wig who stood looking after her, lips thoughtfully pursed.

"Oh, is that Mr. Trevelyan?" Seeing his gaze rigidly fixed over her shoulder, Lady Mumford had turned to discover the reason for this lapse in his attention. "Whatever is he doing, standing there by himself?"

Before Grey could respond, Lady Mumford had seized him by the arm and was towing him determinedly toward the gentleman.

Trevelyan was got up with his customary dash; his buttons were gilt, each with a small emerald at its center, and his cuffs edged with gold lace, his linen scented with a delicate aroma of lavender. Grey was still wearing his oldest uniform, much creased and begrimed by his excursions, and while he usually did not affect a wig, he had on the present occasion not even had opportunity to tidy his hair, let alone bind or powder it properly. He could feel a loose strand hanging down behind his ear.

Feeling distinctly at a disadvantage, Grey bowed and murmured inconsequent pleasantries, as Lady Mumford embarked on a detailed inquisition of Trevelyan, with regard to his upcoming nuptials.

Observing the latter's urbane demeanor, Grey found it increasingly difficult to believe that he had in fact seen what he thought he had seen over the chamber pots. Trevelyan was cordial and mannerly, betraying not the slightest sense of inner disquiet. Perhaps Quarry had been right after all: trick of the light, imagination, some inconsequent blemish, perhaps a birthmark—

"Ho, Major Grey! We have not met, I think? I am von Namtzen."

As though Trevelyan's presence had not been sufficient oppression, a shadow fell across Grey at this point, and he looked up to discover that the very tall German had come to join them, hawklike blond features set in a grimace of congeniality. Behind von Namtzen, Olivia rolled her eyes at Grey in a gesture of helplessness.

Not caring to be loomed over, Grey took a polite step back, but to

no avail. The Hanoverian advanced enthusiastically and seized him in a fraternal embrace.

"We are allies!" von Namtzen announced dramatically to the room at large. "Between the lion of England and the stallion of Hanover, who can stand?" He released Grey, who, with some irritation, perceived that his mother appeared to be finding something amusing in the situation.

"So! Major Grey, I have had the honor this afternoon to be observing the practice of gunnery at Woolwich Arsenal, in company with your Colonel Quarry!"

"Indeed," Grey murmured, noting that one of his waistcoat buttons appeared to be missing. Had he lost it during the contretemps at the gaol, he wondered, or at the hands of this plumed maniac?

"Such booms! I was deafened, quite deafened," von Namtzen assured the assemblage, beaming. "I have heard also the guns of Russia, at St. Petersburg—pah! They are nothing; mere farts, by comparison."

One of the ladies tittered behind her fan. This appeared to encourage von Namtzen, who embarked upon an exegesis of the military personality, giving his unbridled opinions on the virtues of the soldiery of various nations. While the Captain's remarks were ostensibly addressed to Grey, and peppered by occasional interjections of "Do you not agree, Major?", his voice was sufficiently resonant as to overpower all other conversation in his immediate vicinity, with the result that he was shortly surrounded by a company of attentive listeners. Grey, to his relief, was able to retreat inconspicuously.

This relief was short-lived, though; as he accepted a glass of wine from a proffered tray, he discovered that he was standing cheek by jowl again with Joseph Trevelyan, and now alone with the man, both Lady Mumford and Olivia having inconveniently decamped to the supper tables.

"The English?" von Namtzen was saying rhetorically, in answer to some question from Mrs. Haseltine. "Ask a Frenchman what he thinks of the English army, and he will tell you that the English soldier is clumsy, crude, and boorish."

Grey met Trevelyan's eye with an unexpected sympathy of feeling, the two men at once united in their unspoken opinion of the Hanoverian.

"One might ask an English soldier what he thinks of the French, too," Trevelyan murmured in Grey's ear. "But I doubt the answer would be suited to a drawing room."

Taken by surprise, Grey laughed. This was a tactical error, as it drew von Namtzen's attention to him once more.

"However," von Namtzen added, with a gracious nod toward Grey over the heads of the intervening crowd, "whatever else may be said of them, the English are ... invariably ferocious."

Grey lifted his glass in polite acknowledgment, ignoring his mother, who had gone quite pink in the face with the difficulty of containing her emotions.

He turned half away from the Hanoverian and the Countess, which left him face-to-face with Trevelyan; an awkward position, under the circumstances. Requiring some pretext of conversation, he thanked Trevelyan for his graciousness in sending Byrd.

"Byrd?" Trevelyan said, surprised. "Jack Byrd? You've seen him?"

"No." Grey was surprised in turn. "I referred to Tom Byrd. Another of your footmen—though he says he is brother to Jack."

"Tom Byrd?" Trevelyan's dark brows drew together in puzzlement. "Certainly he is Jack Byrd's brother—but he is no footman. Beyond that ... I did not send him anywhere. Do you mean to tell me that he has imposed his presence upon you, on the pretext that *I* sent him?"

"He said that Colonel Quarry had sent a note to you, advising you of ... recent events," he temporized, returning the nod of a passing acquaintance. "And that you had in consequence dispatched him to assist me in my enquiries."

Trevelyan said something that Grey supposed to be a Cornish oath, his lean cheeks growing red beneath his face powder. Glancing about, he drew Grey aside, lowering his voice.

"Harry Quarry did communicate with me—but I said nothing to Byrd. Tom Byrd is the boy who cleans the boots, for God's sake! I should scarcely take him into my confidence!"

"I see." Grey rubbed a knuckle across his upper lip, suppressing his involuntary smile at the recollection of Tom Byrd, drawing himself up to his full height, claiming to be a footman. "I gather that he somehow informed himself, then, that I was charged with ... certain enquiries. No doubt he is concerned for his brother's welfare," he added, remembering the young man's white face and subdued manner as they left the Bow Street compter.

"No doubt he is," Trevelyan said, plainly not perceiving this as mitigation. "But that is scarcely an excuse. I cannot believe such behavior! Inform himself—why, he has invaded my private office and

read my correspondence—the infernal cheek! I should have him arrested. And then to have left my house without permission, and come here to practice upon you ... This is unconscionable! Where is he? Bring him to me at once! I shall have him whipped, and dismissed without character!"

Trevelyan was growing more livid by the moment. His anger was surely justified, and yet Grey found himself oddly reluctant to hand Tom Byrd over to justice. The boy must plainly have been aware that he was sacrificing his position—and quite possibly his skin—by his actions, and yet he had not hesitated to act.

"A moment, if you will, sir." He bowed to Trevelyan, and made his way toward Thomas, who was passing through the crowd with a tray of drinks—and not a moment too soon.

"Wine, my lord?" Thomas dipped his tray invitingly.

"Yes, if you haven't anything stronger." Grey took a glass at random and drained it in a manner grossly disrespectful to the vintage, but highly necessary to his state of mind, and took another. "Is Tom Byrd in the house?"

"Yes, my lord. I saw him in the kitchens just now."

"Ah. Well, go and make sure that he stays there, would you?"

"Yes, my lord."

Seeing Thomas off with his tray, Grey returned slowly to Trevelyan, a wineglass in either hand.

"I am sorry," he said, offering one of the glasses to Trevelyan. "The boy seems to have disappeared. Fearful of being discovered in his imposture, I daresay."

Trevelyan was still flushed with indignation, though his breeding had by now overtaken his temper.

"I must apologize," he said stiffly. "I regret most extremely this deplorable situation. That a servant of mine should have practiced upon you in such fashion—I cannot excuse such unwarrantable intrusion, on any grounds."

"Well, he has caused me no inconvenience," Grey said mildly, "and was in fact helpful in some small way." He brushed a thumb unobtrusively over the edge of his jaw, finding it still smooth.

"That is of no importance. He is dismissed at once from my service," Trevelyan said, mouth hardening. "And I beg you will accept my apologies for this base imposition."

Grey was not surprised at Trevelyan's reaction. He was surprised at the revelation of Tom Byrd's behavior; the boy must have the

strongest of feelings for his brother—and under the circumstances, Grey was inclined to a certain sympathy. He was also impressed at the lad's imagination in conceiving such a scheme—to say nothing of his boldness in carrying it out.

Dismissing Trevelyan's apologies with a gesture, he sought to turn the conversation to other matters.

"You enjoyed the music this evening?" he asked.

"Music?" Trevelyan looked blank for a moment, then recovered his manners. "Yes, certainly. Your mother has exquisite taste—do tell her I said so, will you?"

"Certainly. In truth, I am somewhat surprised that my mother has found time for such social pursuits," Grey said pleasantly, waving a hand at the harpist, who had resumed playing as background to the supper conversation. "My female relations are so obsessed with wedding preparations of late that I should have thought any other preoccupation would be summarily dismissed."

"Oh?" Trevelyan frowned, his mind plainly still on the matter of the Byrds. Then his expression cleared, and he smiled, quite transforming his face. "Oh, yes, I suppose so. Women do love weddings."

"The house is filled from attic to cellar with bridesmaids, bolts of lace, and sempstresses," Grey went on carelessly, keeping a sharp eye on Trevelyan's face for any indications of guilt or hesitancy. "I cannot sit down anywhere without fear of impalement upon stray pins and needles. But I daresay the same conditions obtain at your establishment?"

Trevelyan laughed, and Grey could see that despite the ordinariness of his features, he was possessed of a certain charm.

"They do," he admitted. "With the exception of the bridesmaids. I am spared that, at least. But it will all be over soon." He glanced across the room toward Olivia as he spoke, with a faint wistfulness in his expression that both surprised Grey and reassured him somewhat.

The conversation concluded in a scatter of cordialities, and Trevelyan took his leave with grace, heading across the room to speak to Olivia before departing. Grey looked after him, reluctantly admiring the smoothness of his manners, and wondering whether a man who knew himself to be afflicted with the French disease could possibly discuss his forthcoming wedding with such insouciance. But there was Quarry's finding of the house in Meacham Street—conflicting, rather, with Trevelyan's pious promise to his dying mother.

"Thank God he's gone at last." His own mother had approached without his notice, and stood beside him, fanning herself with satisfaction as she watched Captain von Namtzen's plumes bobbing out of the library toward the front door.

"Beastly Hun," she remarked, smiling and bowing to Mr. and Mrs. Hartsell, who were also departing. "Did you *smell* that dreadful pomade he was using? What was it, some disgusting scent like patchouli? Civet, perhaps?" She turned her head, sniffing suspiciously at a blue damask shoulder. "The man reeks as though he had just emerged from a whorehouse, I swear. And he *would* keep touching me, the hound."

"What would you know of whorehouses?" Grey demanded. Then he saw the gimlet gleam in the Countess's eye and the slight curve of her lips. His mother delighted in answering rhetorical questions.

"No, don't tell me," he said hastily. "I don't want to know." The Countess pouted prettily, then folded her fan with a snap and pressed it against her lips in a token of silence.

"Have you eaten, Johnny?" she asked, flipping the fan open again.

"No," he said, suddenly recalling that he was starving. "I hadn't the chance."

"Well, then." The Countess waved one of the footmen over, selected a small pie from his tray, and handed it to her son. "Yes, I saw you talking to Lady Mumford. Kind of you; the dear old thing dotes upon you."

Dear old thing. Lady Mumford was possibly the Countess's senior by a year. Grey mumbled a response, impeded by pie. It was steak with mushrooms, delectable in flaky pastry.

"Whatever were you talking to Joseph Trevelyan so intently about, though?" the Countess asked, raising her fan in farewell to the Misses Humber. She turned to look at her son, and lifted one brow, then laughed. "Why, you've gone quite red in the face, John—one might think Mr. Trevelyan had made you some indecent proposal!"

"Ha ha," Grey said, thickly, and put the rest of the pie into his mouth.



Chapter 6

A Visit to the Convent

In the event, they did not visit the brothel in Meacham Street until Saturday night.

The doorman gave Quarry an amiable nod of recognition—a welcome expanded upon by the madam, a long-lipped, big-arsed woman in a most unusual green velvet gown, topped by a surprisingly respectable-looking lace-trimmed cap and kerchief that matched the lavish trim of gown and stomacher.

"Well, if it's not Handsome Harry!" she exclaimed in a voice nearly as deep as Quarry's own. "You been neglectin' us, me old son." She gave Quarry a companionable buffet in the ribs, and wrinkled back her upper lip like an ancient horse, exposing two large yellow teeth, these appearing to be the last remaining in her upper jaw.

"Still, I s'pose we must forgive you, mustn't we, for bringing such a sweet poppet as this along!"

She turned her oddly engaging smile on Grey, a shrewd eye taking in the silver buttons on his coat and the fine lawn of his ruffles at a glance.

"And what's your name, then, me sweet child?" she asked, seizing him firmly by the arm and drawing him after her into a small parlor. "You've never come here before, I know; I should recall a pretty face like yours!"

"This is Lord John Grey, Mags," Quarry said, throwing off his cloak and tossing it familiarly over a chair. "A particular friend of mine, eh?"

"Oh, to be sure, to be sure. Well, now, I wonder who might suit?..." Mags was sizing Grey up with the skill of a horse trader on fair day;

he felt tight in the chest and avoided her glance by affecting an interest in the room's decoration, which was eccentric, to say the least.

He had been in brothels before, though not often. This was a cut above the usual bagnio, with paintings on the walls and a good Turkey carpet before a handsome mantelpiece, on which sat a collection of thumbscrews, irons, tongue-borers, and other implements whose use he didn't wish to imagine. A calico cat was sprawled among these ornaments, eyes closed, one paw dangling indolently over the fire.

"Like me collection, do you?" Mags hovered at his shoulder, nodding at the mantelpiece. "That little 'un's from Newgate; got the irons from the whipping post at Bridewell when the new one was put up last year."

"They ain't for use," Quarry murmured in his other ear. "Just show. Though if your taste runs that way, there's a gel called Josephine—"

"What a handsome cat," Grey said, rather loudly. He extended a forefinger and scratched the beast under the chin. It suffered this attention for a moment, then opened bright yellow eyes and sharply bit him.

"You want to watch out for Batty," Mags said, as Grey jerked back his hand with an exclamation. "Sneaky, that's what she is." She shook her head indulgently at the cat, which had resumed its doze, and poured out two large glasses of porter, which she handed to her guests.

"Now, we've lost Nan, I'm afraid, since you was last here," she said to Quarry. "But I've a sweet lass called Peg, from Devonshire, as I think you'll like."

"Blonde?" Quarry said with interest.

"Oh, to be sure! Tits like melons, too."

Quarry promptly drained his glass and set it down, belching slightly.

"Splendid."

Grey managed to catch Quarry's eye, as he was turning to follow Mags to the parlor door.

"What about Trevelyan?" he mouthed.

"Later," Quarry mouthed back, patting his pocket. He winked, and disappeared into the corridor.

Grey sucked his wounded finger, brooding. Doubtless Quarry was right; the chances of extracting information were better once social relations had been loosened by the expenditure of cash—and it was of course sensible to question the whores; the girls might spill things in privacy that the madam's professional discretion would guard. He just hoped that Harry would remember to ask his blonde about Trevelyan.

He stuck his injured finger in the glass of porter and frowned at the cat, now wallowing on its back among the thumbscrews, inviting the unwary to rub its furry belly.

"The things I do for family," he muttered balefully, and resigned himself to an evening of dubious pleasure.

He did wonder about Quarry's motives in suggesting this expedition. He had no idea how much Harry knew or suspected about his own predilections; things had been said, during the affair of the Hellfire Club ... but he had no notion how much Harry might have overheard on that occasion, nor yet what he had made of it, if he had.

On the other hand, given what he himself knew of Quarry's own character and predilections, it was unlikely that any ulterior motive was involved. Harry simply liked whores—well, any woman, actually; he wasn't particular.

The madam returned a moment later to find Grey in fascinated contemplation of the paintings. Mythological in subject and mediocre in execution, the paintings nonetheless boasted a remarkable sense of invention on the part of the artist. Grey pulled himself away from a large study showing a centaur engaged in amorous coupling with a very game young woman, and forestalled Mags' suggestions.

"Young," he said firmly. "Quite young. But not a child," he added hastily. He withdrew his finger from the glass and licked it, making a face. "And some decent wine, if you please. A lot of it."

Much to his surprise, the wine *was* decent; a rich, fruity red, whose origin he didn't recognize. The whore was young, as per his request, but also a surprise.

"You won't mind that she's Scotch, me dear?" Mags flung back the chamber door, exposing a scrawny dark-haired girl crouched on the bed, wrapped up in a wooly shawl, despite a good fire burning in the hearth. "Some chaps finds the barbarous accent puts 'em off, but she's a good girl, Nessie—she'll keep stumm, and you tell her to."

The madam set the decanter and glasses on a small table and smiled at the whore with genial threat, receiving a hostile glare in return. "Not at all," Grey murmured, gesturing the madam out with a courteous bow. "I am sure we shall suit splendidly."

He closed the door and turned to the girl. Despite his outward self-possession, he felt an odd sensation in the pit of his stomach.

"Stumm?" he asked.

"Tis the German word for dumb," the girl said, eyeing him narrowly. She jerked her head toward the door, where the madam had vanished. "She's German, though ye wouldna think it, to hear her. Magda, she's called. But she calls the doorkeep Stummle—and he's a mute, to be sure. So, d'ye want me to clapper it, then?" She put a hand across her mouth, slitted eyes above it reminding him of the cat just before it bit him.

"No," he said. "Not at all."

In fact, the sound of her speech had unleashed an extraordinary—and quite unexpected—tumult of sensation in his bosom. A mad mix of memory, arousal, and alarm, it was not an entirely pleasant feeling—but he wanted her to go on talking, at all costs.

"Nessie," he said, pouring out a glass of wine for her. "I've heard that name before—though it was not applied to a person."

Her eyes stayed narrow, but she took the drink.

"I'm a person, no? It's short for Agnes."

"Agnes?" He laughed, from the sheer exhilaration of her presence. Not just her speech—that slit-eyed look of dour suspicion was so ineffably *Scots* that he felt transported. "I thought it was the name the local inhabitants gave to a legendary monster, believed to live in Loch Ness."

The slitted eyes popped open in surprise.

"Ye've heard of it? Ye've been in Scotland?"

"Yes." He took a large swallow of his own wine, warm and rough on his palate. "In the north. A place called Ardsmuir. You know it?"

Evidently she did; she scrambled off the bed and backed away from him, wineglass clenched so hard in one hand, he thought she might break it.

"Get out," she said.

"What?" He stared at her blankly.

"Out!" A skinny arm shot out of the folds of her shawl, finger jabbing toward the door.

"But-"

"Soldiers are the one thing, and bad enough, forbye—but I'm no takin' on one of Butcher Billy's men, and that's flat!"

Her hand dipped back under the shawl, and reemerged with something small and shiny. Lord John froze.

"My dear young woman," he began, slowly reaching out to set down his wineglass, all the time keeping an eye on the knife. "I am afraid you mistake me. I—"

"Oh, no, I dinna mistake ye a bit." She shook her head, making frizzy dark curls fluff round her head like a halo. Her eyes had gone back to slits, and her face was white, with two hectic spots burning over her cheekbones.

"My da and two brothers died at Culloden, *duine na galladh*! Take that English prick out your breeks, and I'll slice it off at the root, I swear I will!"

"I have not the slightest intention of doing so," he assured her, lifting both hands to indicate his lack of offensive intent. "How old are you?" Short and skinny, she looked about eleven, but must be somewhat older, if her father had perished at Culloden.

The question seemed to give her pause. Her lips pursed uncertainly, though her knife hand held steady.

"Fourteen. But ye needna think I dinna ken what to do with this!"

"I should never suspect you of inability in any sphere, I assure you, madam."

There was a moment of silence that lengthened into awkwardness as they faced each other warily, both unsure how to proceed from this point. He wanted to laugh; she was at once so doubtful and yet so in earnest. At the same time, her passion forbade any sort of disrespect.

Nessie licked her lips and made an uncertain jabbing motion toward him with the knife.

"I said ye should get out!"

Keeping a wary eye on the blade, he slowly lowered his hands and reached for his wineglass.

"Believe me, madam, if you are disinclined, I should be the last to force you. It would be a shame to waste such excellent wine, though. Will you not finish your glass, at least?"

She had forgotten the glass she was holding in her other hand. She glanced down at it, surprised, then up at him.

"Ye dinna want to swive me?"

"No, indeed," he assured her, with complete sincerity. "I should be obliged, though, if you would honor me with a few moments' conversation. That is—I suppose that you do not wish me to summon Mrs. Magda at once?"

He gestured toward the door, raising one eyebrow, and she bit her lower lip. Inexperienced as he might be in brothels, he was reasonably sure that a madam would look askance at a whore who not only refused custom, but who took a knife to the patrons without evident provocation.

"Mmphm," she said, reluctantly lowering the blade.

Without warning, he felt an unexpected rush of arousal, and turned from her to hide it. Christ, he hadn't heard that uncouth Scottish noise in months—not since his last visit to Helwater—and had certainly not expected it to have such a powerful effect, rendered as it was in a sniffy girlish register, rather than with the tone of gruff menace to which he was accustomed.

He gulped his wine, and busied himself in pouring out another glass, asking casually over his shoulder, "Tell me—given the undoubted strength and justice of your feelings regarding English soldiers, how is it that you find yourself in London?"

Her lips pressed into a seam, and her dark brows lowered, but after a moment she relaxed enough to raise her glass and take a sip.

"Ye dinna want to ken how I came to be a whore—only why I'm here?"

"I should say that the former question, while of undoubted interest, is your own affair," he said politely. "But since the latter question affects my own interests—yes, that is what I am asking."

"Ye're an odd cove, and no mistake." She tilted back her head and drank off the wine quickly, keeping a suspicious eye trained on him all the while. She lowered it with a deep exhalation of satisfaction, licking red-stained lips.

"That's no bad stuff," she said, sounding a little surprised. "It's the madam's private stock—German, aye? Gie us another, then, and I'll tell ye, if ye want to know so bad."

He obliged, refilling his own glass at the same time. It was good wine; good enough to warm stomach and limbs, while not unduly clouding the mind. Under its beneficent influence, he felt the tension he had carried in neck and shoulders since entering the brothel gradually fade away.

For her part, the Scottish whore seemed similarly affected. She sipped with a delicate greed that drained her cup twice while she told her tale—a tale he gathered she had told before, recounted as it was with circumstantial embellishments and dramatic anecdotes. In sum, it was simple enough, though; finding life insupportable in the

Highlands after Culloden and Cumberland's devastations, her surviving brother had gone away to sea, and she and her mother had come south, begging for their bread, her mother occasionally reduced to the expedient of selling her body when begging was not fruitful.

"Then we fell in with *him*," she said, making a sour grimace of the word, "in Berwick." *He* had been an English soldier named Harte, newly released from service, who took them "under his protection"—a concept that Harte implemented by setting up Nessie's mother in a small cottage where she could entertain his army acquaintances in comfort and privacy.

"He saw what a profit could be made, and so he'd go out now and again, huntin', and come back wi' some poor lass he'd found starvin' on the roads. He'd speak soft to them, buy them shoes and feed them up, and next thing they kent, they were spreading their legs three times a night for the soldiers who'd put a bullet through their husbands' heids—and within two years, Bob Harte was drivin' a coach-and-four."

It might be an approximation of the truth—or it might not.

Having no grounds for personal delusion, it was clear to Grey that a whore's profession was one founded on mendacity. And if one could not believe in a whore's central premise, unspoken though it was, one could scarcely place great credence in anything she said.

Still, it was an absorbing story—as it was meant to be, he thought cynically. He did not stop her, though; beyond the necessity of putting her at ease if he was to get any information from her, the simple fact was that he enjoyed hearing her talk.

"We met Bob Harte when I was nay more than five," she said, putting a fist to her mouth to stifle a belch. "He waited until I was eleven—when I began to bleed—and then ..." She paused, blinking, as though searching for inspiration.

"And then your mother, bent upon protecting your virtue, slew him in order to preserve you," Grey suggested. "She was taken up and hanged, of course, whereupon you found yourself obliged by necessity to embrace the fate which she had sacrificed herself to prevent?" He lifted his glass to her in ironic toast, leaning back in his seat.

Rather to his surprise, she burst out laughing.

"No," she said, wiping a hand beneath her nose, which had gone quite pink, "but that's no bad. Better than the truth, aye? I'll remember that one." She lifted her glass in acknowledgment, then tilted back her head and drained it.

He reached for the bottle, only to find it empty. Rather to his surprise, the other was empty, too.

"I'll get more," Nessie said promptly. She bounced off the bed and was out of the room before he could protest. She had left the knife, he saw; it lay on the table, next to a covered basket. Leaning over and lifting the napkin from this, he discovered that it contained a pot of some slippery unguent, and various interesting appliances, a few of obvious intent, others quite mysterious in function.

He was holding one of the more obvious of these engines, admiring the artistry of it—which was remarkably detailed, even to the turgid veins visible upon the surface of the bronze—when she came back, a large jug clasped to her bosom.

"Oh, is that what ye like?" she asked, nodding at the object in his hand.

His mouth opened, but fortunately no words emerged. He dropped the heavy object, which struck him painfully in the thigh before hitting the carpeted floor with a thump.

Nessie finished pouring two fresh glasses of wine and took a gulp from hers before bending to pick the thing up.

"Oh, good, ye've warmed it a bit," she said with approval. "That bronze is mortal cold." Holding her full glass carefully in one hand and the phallic engine in the other, she knee-walked over the bed and settled herself among the pillows. Sipping her wine, she took hold of the engine with her other hand and used the tip to inch her shift languidly up the reaches of her skinny thighs.

"Shall I say things?" she inquired, in a businesslike tone. "Or d'ye want just to watch and I'll pretend ye're no there?"

"No!" Emerging suddenly from his tongue-tied state, Grey spoke more loudly than he had intended to. "I mean—no. Please. Don't ... do that."

She looked surprised, then mildly irritated, but relinquished her hold on the object and sat up.

"Well, what then?" She pushed back the brambles of her hair, eyeing him in speculation. "I suppose I could suckle ye a bit," she said reluctantly. "But only if ye wash it well first. With soap, mind."

Feeling suddenly that he had drunk a great deal, and much more quickly than he had intended, Grey shook his head, fumbling in his coat.

"No, not that. What I want—" He withdrew the miniature of Joseph Trevelyan, which he had abstracted from his cousin's bedroom, and

laid it on the bed before her. "I want to know if this man has the pox. Not clap—syphilis."

Nessie's eyes, hitherto narrowed, went round with surprise. She glanced at the picture, then at Grey.

"Ye think I can tell from lookin' at his *face*?" she inquired incredulously.

A more comprehensive explanation given, Nessie sat back on her heels, blinking meditatively at the miniature of Trevelyan.

"So ye dinna want him to marry your cousin, and he's poxed, eh?"

"That is the situation, yes."

She nodded gravely at Grey.

"That's verra sweet of you. And you an Englishman, too!"

"Englishmen are capable of loyalty," he assured her dryly. "At least to their families. Do you know the man?"

"I've no had him, myself, but aye, I think I've maybe seen him once or twice." She closed one eye, considering the portrait again. She was swaying slightly, and Grey began to fear that his wine strategy had miscarried of its own success.

"Hmm!" she said, and nodded to herself. Tucking the miniature into the neck of her shift—given the meagerness of her aspect, he couldn't imagine what held it there—she slid off the bed and took a soft blue wrapper from its peg.

"Some of the lasses will be busy the noo, but I'll go and have a word wi' those still in the sallong, shall I?"

"The ... oh, the salon. Yes, that would be very helpful. Can you be discreet about your inquiries, though?"

She drew herself up with tipsy dignity.

"O' course I can. Leave me a bit o' the wine, aye?" Waving at the jug, she pulled the wrapper around her and swayed from the room in an exaggerated manner better suited to someone with hips.

Sighing, Grey sat back in his chair and poured another glass of wine. He had no idea what the vintage was costing him, but it was worth it.

He held his glass to the light, examining it. Wonderful color, and the nose of it was excellent—fruity and deep. He took another sip, contemplating progress to date. So far, so good. With luck, he would have an answer regarding Trevelyan almost at once—though it might be necessary to return, if Nessie could not manage to speak to whichever girls had most recently been with him.

The prospect of a return visit to the brothel gave him no qualms, though, since he and Nessie had reached their unspoken understanding.

He did wonder what she would have done, had he been truly interested in a carnal encounter rather than information. She had appeared deeply sincere in her objections to servicing one of Cumberland's men—and in all honesty, he thought those objections not unreasonable.

The Highland campaign following Culloden had been his first, and he had seen such sights during it as would have made him ashamed to be a soldier, had he been in any frame of mind at the time as to encompass them. As it was, he had been shocked to numbness, and by the time he saw real action in battle, he was in France, and fighting against an honorable enemy—not the women and children of a defeated foe.

Culloden had been his first battle, in a way—though he had not seen action there, thanks to the scruples of his elder brother, who had brought him along to have a taste of military life but drew the line at letting him fight.

"If you think I am risking having to take your mutilated body home to Mother, you are demented," Hal had grimly informed him. "You haven't a commission; it's not your duty yet to go and get your arse shot off, so you're not going to. Stir one foot out of camp, and I'll have Sergeant O'Connell thrash you in front of the entire regiment, I promise you."

Fool that he was at sixteen, he had regarded this as monstrous injustice. And when he was at length allowed to set foot on the field, in the aftermath of the battle, he had gone out with pulse pounding, pistol cold in a sweating hand.

He and Hector had discussed it before, lying close together in a nest of spring grass under the stars, a little apart from the others. Hector had killed two men, face-to-face—God knew how many more, in the smoke of battle.

"You can't tell, really," Hector had explained, from the lofty heights of his four years' advantage and his second lieutenant's commission. "Not unless it's face-to-face, with a bayonet, say, or your sword. Otherwise, it's all black smoke and noise and you've no idea what you're doing—you just watch your officer and run when he tells you,

fire and reload—and sometimes you see a Scot go down, but you never know if it was your shot that took him. He might just have stepped in a mole hole, for all you know!"

"But you do know—when it's close." He had given Hector a rude nudge with his knee. "So what was it like then? Your first? Don't dare to tell me you don't remember!"

Hector had grabbed him and squeezed the muscle of his thigh until he squealed like a rabbit, then gathered him in close, laughing, forcing John's face into the hollow of his shoulder.

"All right, I do remember, then. Wait, though." He was quiet for a moment, his breath stirring John's hair warm above the ear. It was too early in the year for midges, but the wind moved over them fresh and cool, tickling their skins with ends of waving grass.

"It was—well, it was fast. Lieutenant Bork had sent me and another fellow round a bit of copse to see if anything was doing, and I was in the lead. I heard a sort of thump and a cough behind me, and I thought Meadows—he was following me—I thought he'd stumbled. I turned to tell him to be quiet, and there he was lying on the ground, with blood all over his head, and a Scot just dropping the thumping great rock he'd hit Meadows with, and bending down to snatch his gun.

"They're like animals, you know; all wild whiskers and dirt, generally barefoot and half-naked to boot. This one glanced up and saw me, and tried to seize the musket up and brain me, only Meadows had fallen on it, and I—well, I just screamed and lunged at him. I didn't think a bit about it; it was just like the drills—only it felt a lot different when the bayonet went into him."

John had felt a small shudder run through the body pressed against him, and put his arm round Hector's waist, squeezing in reassurance.

"Did he die right away?" he asked.

"No," Hector said softly, and John felt him swallow. "He fell back and sat down hard on the ground, and—and I lost hold of the gun, so he was sitting there with the bayonet sticking in him, and the gun's butt ... it was on the ground, bracing him, almost, like a shooting stick."

"What did you do?" He stroked Hector's chest, trying in some clumsy way to comfort him, but that was far beyond his powers at the moment.

"I knew I should do something—try to finish him, somehow—but I couldn't think how. All I could do was to stand there, like a ninny,

and him staring up at me out of that dirty face, and I ..."

Hector swallowed again, hard.

"I was crying," he said, all in a rush. "I kept saying, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' and crying. And he sort of shook his head, and he said something to me, but it was in that barbarous Erse, and I couldn't understand if he knew what I'd said, or was cursing me, or if he wanted something, water maybe ... I had water ..."

Hector's voice trailed off, but John could tell from the thickened sound of his breath that he was near to crying now. His hand was fastened hard around John's upper arm, clinging hard enough to leave a bruise, but John stayed still, perfectly still, until Hector's breathing eased and the iron-hard grip relaxed at last.

"It seemed to take a long time," he said, and cleared his throat. "Though I suppose it wasn't, really. After a bit, his head just fell forward, very slowly, and stayed that way."

He took a deep, wet breath, as though cleansing himself of the memory, and gave John a reassuring hug.

"Yes, you do remember the first one. But I'm sure it will be easier for you—you'll do it better."

Grey lay on Nessie's bed, wineglass in hand, sipping slowly. He stared up at the soot-stained ceiling, but was seeing instead the gray skies over Culloden. It *had* been easier—to do, at least, if not to recall.

"You'll go with Windom's detail," Hal had said, handing him a long pistol. "Your job is to give the *coup de grâce*, if you find any still alive. Through one eye is surest, but behind the ear will answer well enough, if you find you can't bear the eyes."

His brother's face was drawn with strain, white under the smudges of powder smoke; Hal was only twenty-five, but looked twice that, uniform plastered to him with rain and filthy with mud from the field. He gave his orders in a calm, clear voice, but Grey felt his brother's hand tremble as he gave him the gun.

"Hal," he said, as his brother turned away.

"Yes?" Hal turned back, patient but empty-eyed.

"You all right, Hal?" he asked, lowering his voice lest anyone nearby hear him.

Hal seemed to be looking somewhere far beyond him; it took a visible effort for him to bring his gaze back from that distant place, to fix it on his younger brother's face.

"Fine," he said. The edge of his mouth trembled, as though he wanted to smile in reassurance, but it fell back in exhaustion. He

clapped a hand on John's shoulder and squeezed hard; John felt oddly as though he were providing support to his brother, rather than the other way round.

"Just remember, Johnny—it's a mercy that you give them. A mercy," he repeated softly, then dropped his hand and left.

It lacked perhaps two hours 'til sunset when Corporal Windom's detail set out onto the field, slogging through mud and moor plants that clung and grasped at their boots as they passed. The rain had stopped, but a freezing wind plastered his damp cloak to his body. He remembered the mixture of dread and excitement in his belly, superseded by the numbness of his fingers and his fear that he would not be able to prime the pistol again, if he had to use it more than once.

As it was, he had no need to use it at all for some time; all the men they came across were clearly dead. Nearly all Scots, though here and there a red coat burned like flame among the dull moor plants. The fallen of the English were taken away with respect, on stretchers. The enemy were thrown in heaps, the soldiers blue-fingered and mumbling curses in puffs of white breath as they dragged the bodies like so many felled logs, naked limbs like pale branches, stiff and awkward in the handling. He was not sure if he should help with this work, but no one seemed to expect him to; he trailed after the soldiers, gun in hand, growing colder by the moment.

He had seen battlefields before, at Preston and Falkirk, though neither had had so many bodies. One dead man was much like another, though, and within a short time, he was no longer bothered by their presence.

He had grown so numb, in fact, that he was barely startled when one of the soldiers shouted, "Hey, Cheeky! Got one for you!" His cold-slowed mind had not had time to interpret this before he found himself face-to-face with the man, the Scot.

He had vaguely supposed that everyone on the field was unconscious, if not dead; execution would be no more than a matter of kneel by the body, place the pistol, pull the trigger, step back and reload.

This man sat bolt upright in the heather, weight braced on the heels of his hands, the smashed leg that had prevented his escape twisted in front of him, streaked with blood. He was staring at Grey, dark eyes lively and watchful. He was young, perhaps Hector's age. The eyes went from Grey's face to the gun in his hand, then back to his face.

The man lifted his chin, setting his mouth hard.

Behind the ear will answer well enough, if you find you can't bear the eyes.

How? How was he to reach behind the ear, with him sitting like that? Grey lifted the pistol awkwardly, and stepped to the side, crouching a bit. The man's head turned, eyes following him.

Grey stopped—but he couldn't stop, the soldiers were watching.

"H-head, or heart?" he asked, trying to keep his voice steady. His hands were shaking; it was cold, though, so very cold.

The dark eyes closed for an instant, opened again, piercing through him.

"Christ, do I care?"

He lifted the pistol, the muzzle wavering a little, and pointed it carefully at the center of the man's body. The Scot's mouth compressed, and he shifted his weight to one hand. Before Grey could jerk away, he had lifted his free hand to seize Grey's wrist.

Startled, Grey made no move to pull away. Breathing hard with effort, teeth gritted against the pain, the Scot guided the barrel so it came to rest against his forehead, just between the eyes. And stared at him.

And what Grey recalled most clearly was not the eyes, but the feel of the fingers, colder even than his own chilled flesh, curling gently round his wrist. There was no strength left now in the touch, but it stilled his shaking. The fingers squeezed, very gently. Offering mercy.

An hour later, they had gone back in darkness, and he had learned of Hector's death.

The candle had been guttering for some time. There was another on the table, but he made no move to reach for it. Instead, he lay staring as the flame went out, and went on drinking wine in the musky dark.

He woke with a splitting head, somewhere in the dark hours before dawn. The candle had gone out, and for a disorienting moment, he had no idea where he was—or with whom. A warm, moist weight was curled against him, and his hand rested on bare flesh.

Possibilities erupted in his mind like a flight of startled quail, then disappeared as he took a deep breath and smelt cheap scent, expensive wine, and female musk. Girl. Yes, of course. The Scottish whore.

He lay still for a moment, muddled, trying to gain his bearings in the unfamiliar dark. There—a thin line of gray marked the shuttered window, a shade lighter than the night inside. Door ... where was the door? He turned his head and saw a faint flicker of light across the floorboards, the exhausted glow of a guttering candle in the hallway. He vaguely remembered some uproar, singing and stamping from below, but that had ceased now. The brothel had subsided into quiet, though it was an odd, uneasy hush, like the troubled sleep of a drunken man. Speaking of which ... he worked his tongue, trying to muster enough saliva from his parched and sticky membranes to swallow. His heart was beating with an unpleasant insistence that seemed to cause his eyeballs to protrude, bulging painfully with each throb of the organ. He hastily closed his eyes, but it didn't help.

It was warm and close in the room, but a faint stirring of air from the shuttered window touched his body, a cool finger raising the hairs of chest and leg. He was naked, but didn't recall undressing.

She was lying on his arm. Moving slowly, he disengaged himself from the girl, taking care not to rouse her. He sat for a moment on the bed, clutching his head in a soundless moan, then rose to his feet, taking great care lest it fall off.

Christ! What had he been about, to drink so much of that ungodly swill? It would have been better to swive the girl and have done with it, he thought, feeling his way across the room through bursts of brilliant white light that lit up the inside of his skull like fireworks on the Thames. His probing foot struck the table leg, and he felt blindly about beneath it until he found the chamber pot.

Somewhat relieved, but still desperately thirsty, he put it down and groped for the ewer and basin. The water in the pitcher was warm and tasted faintly of metal, but he drank it greedily, spilling it down his chin and chest, gulping until his guts began to protest the tepid onslaught.

He wiped a hand down his face and smeared the wetness across his chest, then loosened the shutters, taking deep, shuddering breaths of the cool gray air. Better.

He turned to look for his clothes, but realized belatedly that he couldn't leave without Quarry. The thought of searching the house for his friend, flinging open doors and surprising sleep-sodden whores and their customers, was more than he could countenance in his present condition. Well, the madam would rout Harry out in short order, come daybreak. Nothing for it but wait.

Since he must wait, he might as well do it lying down; his innards were shifting and gurgling in ominous fashion, and his legs felt weak.

The girl was naked, too. She lay curled on her side, back to him, smooth and pale as a smelt on a fishmonger's slab. He crawled cautiously onto the bed and eased himself down beside her. She shifted and murmured, but didn't wake.

The air was much cooler now, with dawn coming on and the shutters ajar. He would have covered himself, but the girl was lying on the rumpled sheet. She shifted again, and he saw the gooseflesh prickling over her skin. She was thinner even than she had seemed the night before, ribs shadowing her sides and the shoulder blades sharp as wings in her bony little back.

He turned on his side and drew her against him, fumbling with one hand to disentangle the damp sheet and draw it over them both—as much to cover her skinniness as for its dubious warmth.

Her loosened hair was thick and curly, soft against his face. The feel of it disturbed him, though it was a moment before he realized why. She'd had hair like that—the Woman. Fraser's wife. Grey knew her name—Fraser had told him—and yet he stubbornly refused to think of her as anything but "the Woman." As though it were her fault—and the fault of her sex alone, at that.

But that was in another country, he thought, pulling the scrawny whore closer to him, and besides, the wench is dead. Fraser had said so.

He'd seen the look in Jamie Fraser's eyes, though. Fraser had not ceased to love his wife merely because she was dead—no more than Grey could or would cease to love Hector. Memory was one thing, though, and flesh another; the body had no conscience.

He wrapped one arm over the girl's fine-boned form, holding her tight against him. Nearly breastless, and narrow-arsed as a boy, he thought, and felt a tiny flame of desire, wine-fueled, lick up the insides of his thighs. Why not? he thought. He was paying for it, after all.

But, *I'm a person, no?* she'd said. And she was neither of the persons he longed for.

He closed his eyes, and kissed the shoulder near his face, very gently. Then he slept again, drifting on the troubled clouds of her hair.



Chapter 7

Green Velvet

He woke to broad daylight and a rumbling stir in the brothel below. The girl was gone—no, not gone. He rolled over and saw her by the window, dressed in her shift, her lips pressed tight in concentration as she plaited her hair, using the reflection in the chamber pot as her looking glass.

"Awake at last, are ye?" she asked, squinting at her reflection. "Thought I might need to poke a darning needle under your toenail to rouse ye." Tying a red ribbon at the end of her plait, she turned and grinned at him.

"Ready for a bit o' breakfast, then, chuck?"

"Don't even mention it." He sat up, slowly, one hand pressed to his forehead.

"Oh, a wee bit peaky this morn, are we?" A brown glass bottle and a pair of wooden tumblers had appeared on the washstand; she poured out something the color of ditch water and thrust the cup into his hand. "Try that; hair o' the dog that bit ye is the best cure, or so they say." She slopped a generous tot into her own glass and drank it off as though it were water.

It wasn't water. He thought it was possibly turpentine, from the smell. Still, he wouldn't be put to shame by a fourteen-year-old whore; he tossed it back in a gulp.

Not turpentine; vitriol. The liquid burned a fiery path straight down his gullet and into his bowels, sending a gust of brimstone fumes through the cavities of his head. Whisky, that's what it was, and very raw whisky, at that.

"Aye, that's the stuff," she said approvingly, watching him. "Have

another?"

Incapable of speech, he blinked watering eyes and held out his cup. Another fuming swallow, and he found that he had recovered sufficient presence of mind to inquire after his vanished clothes.

"Oh, aye. Just here." She hopped up, bright as a sparrow, and pulled open a panel in the wall that hid a row of clothes pegs, upon which his uniform and linen had been hung with care.

"Did you undress me?"

"I dinna see anyone else here, do you?" She put a hand above her eyes, peering about the room in exaggerated fashion. He ignored this, pulling the shirt over his head.

"Why?"

He thought the glint of a smile showed in her eyes, though no trace of it touched her lips.

"So much as ye drank, I kent ye'd wake soon to have a piss, and like enough to stagger off then, if ye could. If ye stayed the night through, though, Magda wouldna bring anyone else up for me." She shrugged, shift sliding off one scrawny shoulder. "Best sleep I've had in months."

"I am deeply gratified to have been of benefit to you, madam," Grey said dryly, assuming his breeches. "And what is likely to be the cost of an entire night spent in your charming company?"

"Two pound," she said promptly. "Ye can pay me now, if ye like."

He gave her a jaundiced look, one hand on his pocketbook.

"Two pound? Ten shillings, more like. Try again."

"Ten shillings?" She tried to look insulted, but failed, thus informing him that he had been close in his estimate. "Well ... one and six, then. Or perhaps one and ten"—she eyed him, her small pink tongue darting out to touch her upper lip in speculation—"if I can find out for ye where he goes?"

"Where who goes?"

"The Cornish lad ye were asking after—Trevelyan."

Grey's headache seemed suddenly diminished. He stared at her for a moment, then reached slowly into his pocketbook. He drew out three pound notes and tossed them into her lap.

"Tell me what you know."

Agnes clasped her thighs together, hands between them, tight on the money, eyes sparkling with pleasure.

"What I ken is that he comes here, aye, maybe twa, three times in a month, but he doesna go wi' any of the lasses—so as I couldna find out about the state of his prick, ye ken." She looked apologetic.

Grey left off fastening his garter buckles, surprised.

"What does he do, then?"

"Weel, he goes into Mrs. Magda's room, same as the rich ones always do—and a wee while later, out comes a woman in one of Maggie's gowns and a big lace cap ... but it's no our Maggie. She's near the same height, aye, but nay bosom to her and nay bum at all—and narrow in the shoulder, where Mags has the meat of a well-fed bullock."

She raised one perfect eyebrow, obviously entertained by the look on his face.

"And then this ... lady ... goes out the back way, intae the alley, where there's a chair waitin'. I've seen her do it," she added, with a sardonic emphasis on the pronoun. "Though I didna ken who it was at the time."

"And does ... she ... come back?" Grey asked, with the same emphasis.

"Aye, she does. She leaves past dark, and comes back just before dawn. I heard the chairmen in the alley, a week past, and bein' as I happened for once to be alone"—she made a brief moue—"I got up and had a keek down from my window to see who it was. I couldna see any more than the top of her cap and a flash of green skirt—but whoever it was, her step was quick and long, like a man's."

She stopped then, looking expectant. Grey rubbed a hand through his tousled hair. The ribbon had come off as he slept, and was nowhere in sight.

"But you think that you can discover where this ... person ... goes to?"

She nodded, certain of herself.

"Oh, aye. I may not have seen the lady's face, but I saw one of the chairmen, plain. Happen he's a big auld lad called Rab, from up near Fife. He hasna often got the price of a whore, but when he does, he asks for me. Homesick, see?"

"Yes, I do see." Grey wiped the hair out of his face, then reached into his pocketbook once more. She spread her legs just in time, catching the handful of silver neatly in the basket of her skirt.

"See that Rab has the price of you soon," Grey suggested. "Aye?"

A rap came on the door, which sprang open to reveal Harry Quarry, bewhiskered and bleary-eyed, coat hung over one shoulder. His shirt was unbuttoned at the neck and only half-tucked into his breeches, the neckcloth discarded. While Quarry did have his wig on, it sat

crookedly astride one ear.

"Not interrupting, am I?" he said, stifling a belch.

Grey hastily took up his own coat and stuffed his feet into his shoes.

"No, not at all. Just coming."

Quarry scratched his ribs, rucking up his shirt in unconscious fashion to show a segment of hairy paunch. He blinked vaguely in Nessie's direction.

"Had a good night, then, Grey? Not much to that one, is there?"

Lord John pressed two fingers between his throbbing brows and essayed what he hoped was an expression of satiated lewdness.

"Ah, well, you know the saying—'the nearer the bone, the sweeter the meat.'"

"Really?" Despite his dishevelment, Quarry perked up a little, peering over Lord John's shoulder into the chamber. "Perhaps I'll give her a try next time, then. What's your name, chuck?"

Half-turning, Lord John saw Nessie's eyes widen at the sight of Quarry, bloodshot and leering. Her mouth twisted in revulsion; she really had no tact, for a whore. He laid a hand on Quarry's arm to distract him.

"Don't think you'd like her, old fellow," he said. "She's Scotch."

Quarry's momentary interest disappeared like a snuffed-out candle.

"Oh, Scotch," he said, belching slightly. "Christ, no. The sound of that barbarous tongue would wilt me on the spot. No, no. Give me a nice, fat English girl, good round bum, plenty of flesh on her, something to get hold of." He aimed a jovial slap at the bum of a passing maid who clearly met these requirements, but she dodged adroitly and he staggered, narrowly avoiding ignominious collapse by catching hold of Grey, who in turn seized the doorjamb with both hands to keep from being overborne. He heard a giggle from Nessie, and straightened up, pulling his clothes into what order he could.

Following this rather undignified departure, they found themselves in a coach, rattling up Meacham Street in a manner highly unsuited to the state of Grey's head.

"Find out anything useful?" Quarry asked, closing one eye to assist in concentration as he redid the buttons of his fly, which had been somehow fastened askew.

"Yes," Grey said, averting his eyes. "But God knows what it means."

He explained his inconclusive findings briefly, causing Quarry to blink owlishly at him.

"I don't know what it means, either," Quarry said, scratching his

balding head. "But you might drop a word to that constable friend of yours—ask if any of his men have heard of a woman in green velvet. If she—or he—is up to something ..."

The coach turned, sending a piercing ray of light through Grey's eyes and straight into the center of his brain. He emitted a low moan. What had Constable Magruder suggested? Housebreaking, horse-stealing, robbery from the person ...

"Right," he said, closing his eyes and breathing deeply, envisioning the Honorable Joseph Trevelyan under arrest for fire-setting or public riot. "I'll do that."



Chapter 8

Enter the Chairman

Grey came down late to breakfast on Monday. The Countess had long since finished her meal and departed; his cousin Olivia was at table, though, informally clad in a muslin wrapper with her hair in a plait down her back, opening letters and nibbling toast.

"Late night?" he said, nodding to her as he slid into his chair.

"Yes." She yawned, covering her mouth daintily with a small fist. "A party at Lady Quinton's. What about you?"

"Nothing so entertaining, I'm afraid." After a long and blissfully restorative sleep, he had spent the Sunday evening at Bernard Sydell's house, listening to interminable complaints about the lack of discipline in the modern army, the moral shortcomings of the younger officers, the miserliness of politicians who expected wars to be fought without adequate materials, the shortsightedness of the current government, lamentations for the departure of Pitt as Prime Minister—who had been just as roundly excoriated when in office—and further remarks in a similar vein.

At one point during these declamations, Malcolm Stubbs had leaned aside and murmured to Grey, "Why don't someone just fetch a pistol and put him out of his misery?"

"Toss you a shilling for the honor," Grey had murmured back, causing Stubbs to choke on the vile sherry Sydell thought appropriate to such gatherings.

Harry Quarry hadn't been there. Grey hoped that Harry was busy with his "something in train," rather than merely avoiding the sherry —for if something definite was not discovered soon regarding O'Connell's death, it was likely to come to the attention not only of

Sydell, but of people with the capacity to cause a great deal more trouble.

"What do you think of these two, John?" Olivia's voice interrupted his thoughts, and he withdrew his attention from the coddled egg before him to look across the table. She was frowning thoughtfully at two narrow lengths of lace, one draped across the silver coffeepot, another suspended from one hand.

"Mm." Grey swallowed egg and tried to focus his attention. "For what?"

"Edging for handkerchiefs."

"That one." He pointed with his spoon at the sample on the coffeepot. "The other is too masculine." In fact, the first one reminded him vividly—though not unpleasantly—of the lace trim on the gown worn by Magda, madam of the Meacham Street brothel.

Olivia's face broke into a beaming smile.

"Exactly what I thought! Excellent; I want to have a dozen handkerchiefs made for Joseph—I'll have an extra half-dozen made up for you as well, shall I?"

"Spending Joseph's money already, are you?" he teased. "The poor man will be bankrupt before you've been married a month."

"Not a bit of it," she said loftily. "This is my own money, from Papa. A gift from the bride to the bridegroom. D'you think he'll like it?"

"I'm sure he'll be charmed at the thought." And lace-trimmed handkerchiefs would go so well with emerald velvet, he thought, stricken by a sudden qualm. All around him, preparations for the wedding were proceeding like the drawing up of battle lines, with regiments of cooks, battalions of sempstresses, and dozens of people with no discernible function but a great deal of self-important busyness swarming through the house each day. Five weeks until the wedding.

"You have a bit of egg on your ruffle, Johnny."

"Have I?" He peered downward, flicking at the offending particle. "There, is it gone?"

"Yes. Aunt Bennie says you have a new valet," she said, still looking him over with an air of appraisal. "That odd little person. Is he not a trifle young and—unpolished—for such a position?"

"Mr. Byrd may lack something in terms of years and experience," Grey admitted, "but he does know how to administer a proper shave." His cousin peered closely at him—like his mother, she was a trifle

short of sight—then leaned across the table to stroke his cheek, a liberty he suffered with good grace.

"Oh, that *is* nice," she said with approval. "Like satin. Is he good with your wardrobe?"

"Splendid," he assured her, with a mental picture of Tom Byrd frowning over his mending of the torn coat seam. "Most assiduous."

"Oh, good. You must tell him, then, to make sure your gray velvet is in good repair. I should like you to wear it for the wedding supper, and last time you had it on, I noticed that the hem had come unstitched in back."

"I shall call it to his attention," he assured her gravely. "Is this concern lest my appearance disgrace your nuptials, or are you practicing care of domestic detail in preparation for assuming command of your own household?"

She laughed, but flushed, very prettily.

"I *am* sorry, Johnny. How overbearing of me! I confess, I do worry. Joseph tells me I need not trouble over anything, his butler is a marvel—but I do not wish to be the sort of wife who is nothing more than an ornament."

She looked quite anxious as she said this, and he felt a deep qualm of misgiving. Caught up in his own responsibilities, he had scarcely taken time to think how his investigation of Joseph Trevelyan might affect his cousin personally, should the man indeed prove to be poxed.

"You are never less than ornamental," he said, a little gruffly, "but I am sure that any man of worth must discern the true nature of your character, and value it much more highly than your outward appearance."

"Oh." She flushed more deeply, and lowered her lashes. "Why—thank you. What a kind thing to say!"

"Not at all. Will I fetch you a kipper?"

They ate in a pleasant silence for a few moments, and Grey's thoughts had begun to drift toward a contemplation of the day's activities, when Olivia's voice pulled him back to the present moment.

"Have you never thought of marriage for yourself, John?"

He plucked a bun from the basket on the table, taking care not to roll his eyes. The newly betrothed and married of either sex invariably believed it their sacred duty to urge others to share their happy state.

"No," he said equably, breaking the bread. "I see no pressing need to acquire a wife. I have no estate or household that requires a mistress, and Hal is making an adequate job of continuing the family

name." Hal's wife, Minnie, had just presented her husband with a third son—the family ran to boys.

Olivia laughed.

"Well, that is true," she agreed. "And I suppose you enjoy playing the gay bachelor, with all the ladies swooning after you. They do, you know."

"Oh, la." He made a dismissive gesture with the butter knife, and resumed his attention to the bun. Olivia seemed to take the hint, and retired into the mysteries of a fruit compote, leaving him to organize his thoughts.

The chief business of the day must be the O'Connell affair, of course. His inquiries into Trevelyan's private life had yielded more mystery than answer so far, but his investigation of the Sergeant's murder had produced still less in the way of results.

Inquiries into the Stokes family had revealed them to be a polyglot crew descended from a Greek sailor who had jumped ship in London some forty years earlier, whereupon he had promptly met and married a girl from Cheapside, taken her name—very sensibly, as his own was Aristopolous Xenokratides—and settled down to produce a numerous family, most of whom had promptly returned to the sea like spawning efts. Iphigenia, stranded on shore by the accident of her gender, ostensibly earned her living by the needle, with occasional financial augmentations offered by assorted gentlemen with whom she had lived, Sergeant O'Connell being the most recent of these.

Grey had set Malcolm Stubbs to explore the family's further connexions, but he had little hope of this producing anything helpful.

As for Finbar Scanlon and his wife—

"Have you ever been in love, John?"

He looked up, startled, to see Olivia looking earnestly at him over the teapot. Evidently she had not abandoned her inquiries, after all, but had merely been occupied with the consumption of breakfast.

"Well ... yes," he said slowly, unsure whether this was mere familial curiosity or something more.

"But you did not marry. Why was that?"

Why was that, indeed. He took a deep breath.

"It wasn't possible," he said simply. "My lover died."

Her face clouded, full lip trembling with sympathy.

"Oh," she murmured, looking down at her empty plate. "That's awfully sad, Johnny. I'm so sorry."

He shrugged with a slight smile, acknowledging her sympathy but

not encouraging further questions.

"Any interesting letters?" he asked, raising his chin toward the small sheaf of papers by her plate.

"Oh! Yes, I almost forgot—here are yours." Burrowing through the stack, she unearthed two missives addressed to him and handed them across.

The first note, from Magruder, was brief but riveting. Sergeant O'Connell's uniform—or at least the coat to it—had been found. The pawnbroker in whose shop it was discovered said that it had been brought in by an Irish soldier, himself wearing a uniform.

I went myself to inquire, Magruder wrote, but the man was unable to be sure of the rank or regiment of this Irishman—and I were loath to press him, for fear of his recollection transforming the man into a Welsh lance-corporal or a Cornish grenadier, under the pressure of forced recollection. For what the observation be worth, he believed the man to be selling an old coat of his own.

Impatient as he was for more detail, Grey was forced to admit the soundness and delicacy of Magruder's instinct. Press questions too far, and a man would tell you what he thought you wanted to hear. It was much better to ask questions briefly, in a number of short sessions, rather than to bombard a witness with interrogation—but time was short.

Still, Magruder had got what he could be sure of. While all insignia and buttons had naturally been stripped from the coat, it was identifiable as having belonged to a sergeant of the 47th. While the government dictated certain specifics of army dress, those gentlemen who raised and financed their own regiments held the privilege of designing the uniforms for said regiments. In the case of the 47th, it was Hal's wife who had patterned the officers' coats, with a narrow buff stripe up the outside of the sleeve, which helped to draw the eye when an arm was waved in command. A sergeant's coat, poorer in material and less stylish in cut, still bore that stripe.

Grey made a mental note to have someone check the other regimental sergeants, to be sure that none had sold an old coat—but this was merely for the sake of thoroughness. Magruder had not only described the coat and included a brief sketch of the garment, but noted also that the lining of the coat had been unstitched at one side, the stitches appearing to have been cut, rather than torn.

Well, that explained where O'Connell had been keeping his booty, if not where it was now. Grey took a bite of cold toast and reached for the second note, sporting Harry Quarry's bold black scrawl. This one was still more brief.

Meet me at St. Martin-in-the-Fields, tomorrow at six o'clock, it read, the signature rendered merely as a large, slapdash "Q ..." P.S. wear old uniform.

He was still frowning at this terse communication when Tom Byrd's round head poked into the room, looking apologetic.

"Me lord? Sorry, sir, but you did say as how if a big Scotchman was to come—"

Grey was already on his feet, leaving Olivia open-mouthed behind him.

Rab the chairman was tall and solid, with a stupid, sullen face that barely brightened into dourness at Grey's greeting.

"Agnes said ye'd pay for a word," he muttered, not quite able to keep from staring at the bronze orrery that stood upon the table by the library window, its graceful arms and swooping orbs catching the morning sun.

"I will," Grey said promptly, wanting to dispose of the man before his mother should come downstairs and start asking questions. "What is the word?"

Rab's bloodshot eyes met his, displaying a bit more intelligence than did the rest of his countenance.

"Ye dinna want to know the price first?"

"Very well. How much do you want?" He could hear the Countess's voice upstairs, raised in song.

The man's thick tongue poked out, touching his upper lip in contemplation.

"Two pound?" he said, trying to sound indifferently truculent, but unable to conceal the tentative note in his voice. Obviously, two pounds was a nearly unthinkable fortune; he had no faith that it might actually be forthcoming, but was willing to hazard the chance.

"How much of that does Agnes get?" Grey asked pointedly. "I shall see her again, mind, and I'll ask to make certain that she's had her share."

"Oh. Ah ..." Rab struggled with the problem of division for a moment, then he shrugged. "Half, then."

Grey was surprised at this generosity—and surprised further that Rab was able to discern his response.

"I mean to marry her," the chairman said gruffly, fixing him with a stare and narrowing one eye as though daring him to make something of this statement. "When she's bought free of her contract, aye?"

Grey bit his tongue to forestall an incautious response to this startling revelation, merely nodding as he dug into his pocketbook. He laid the silver on the desk, but kept his hand over it.

"What are you to tell me, then?"

"A house called 'Lavender,' in Barbican Street. Near to Lincoln's Inn. Big place—not so much to look at from outside, but verra rich within."

Grey felt a sudden cold weight in the pit of his stomach, as though he had swallowed lead shot.

"You have been inside?"

Rab moved one burly shoulder, shaking his head.

"Nah, then. Only to the door. But I could see as there were carpets like that"—he nodded at the silk Kermanshah on the floor by the desk—"and pictures on the wall." He lifted a chin like a battering ram, indicating the painting over the mantelpiece, of Grey's paternal grandfather seated on horseback. The chairman frowned with the effort of recall.

"I could see a bit into one of the rooms. There was a ... thing. No quite like that thing"—he nodded at the orrery—"but along the same lines, ken? Bits o' clockwork, like."

The sensation of cold heaviness was worse. Not that there could have been any doubt about it from the beginning of Rab's account.

"The ... woman you fetched from this place," Grey forced himself to ask. "Do you know her name? Did you deliver her there, as well?"

Rab shook his head, indifferent. There was no sign on his oxlike face that he knew that the person he had transported was not indeed a woman, nor that Lavender House was not merely another wealthy London house.

Grey essayed a few more questions, for form's sake, but received no further information of value, and at last he removed his hand and stood back, nodding to indicate that Rab might take his pay.

The chairman was likely a few years younger than Grey himself, but his hands were gnarled, frozen in a curve, as though in permanent execution of his occupation. Grey watched him fumble, thick fingers slowly pinching up the coins one by one, and curled his own hands into fists among the folds of his banyan, to restrain the impulse to do it for him.

The skin of Rab's hands was thick as horn, the palms yellow with callus. The hands themselves were broad and bluntly powerful, with black hairs sprouting over knobbled joints. Grey saw the chairman to the door himself, all the while imagining those hands upon Nessie's silken skin, with a sense of morbid wonder.

He shut the door and stood with his back against it, as though he had just escaped from close pursuit. His heart was beating fast. Then he realized that he was imagining Rab's brutal grasp upon his own wrists, and closed his eyes.

A dew of sweat prickled on his upper lip and temples, though the sense of inner cold had not diminished. He knew the house near Lincoln's Inn, called "Lavender." And had thought never to see or hear of it again.



Chapter 9

Molly-Walk

The horses clip-clopped through the darkened square at a good rate, but not so fast that he couldn't make out the row of bog-houses—or the vague figures that surrounded them, dim as the moths that flitted through his mother's garden at nightfall, drawn by the perfume of the flowers. He drew a deep, deliberate breath through the open window. Quite a different perfume reached him from the bog-houses, acrid and sour, and under it the remembered smell of the sweat of panic and desire—no less compelling in its way than the scent of nicotiana to the moths.

The bog-houses of Lincoln's Inn were notorious; even more so than Blackfriars Bridge, or the shadowed recesses of the arcades at the Royal Exchange.

A little distance farther on, he rapped on the ceiling with his stick, and the carriage drew to a halt. He paid the driver and stood waiting until the carriage had quite disappeared before turning into Barbican Street.

Barbican Street was a curving lane, less than a quarter mile long, and interrupted by the passage through it of the Fleet Ditch. Covered over for part of its length, the remnants of the river were still open here, spanned by a narrow bridge. The street was various, one end of it a mix of tradesmen's shops and noisy taverns, these yielding place gradually to the houses of minor City merchants, and terminating abruptly beyond the bridge in a small crescent of large houses that turned their backs upon the street, facing superciliously inward to a small private park. One of these was Lavender House.

Grey could as easily have arrived at the crescent by carriage, but he

had wanted to begin at the far end of Barbican Street, approaching his goal more slowly afoot. The journey would give him time to prepare —or so he hoped.

It had been nearly five years since he had last set foot in Barbican Street, and he had changed a great deal in the interim. Had the character of the neighborhood altered as well?

It had not, judging by his first impressions. The street was a dark one, lit only by random spills of window-light and the wash of a cloudy half-moon, but it bustled with life, at least at the near end of the street, where numerous taverns insured traffic. People—mostly men—strolled up and down, brushing shoulders and shouting greetings to friends, or lounged in small gangs around the entrances to the public houses. The smell of ale rose sweet and pungent on the air, mixed with the scents of smoke, roast meat—and bodies, hot with drink and the sweat of a day's labor.

He had borrowed a suit of rough clothes from one of his mother's servants, and wore his hair tied back in a heavy tail, bound with a scrap of leather, with a slouch hat to hide its fairness. There was nothing to distinguish him outwardly from the dyers and fullers, smiths and weavers, bakers and butchers whose haunt this was, and he walked anonymous through the churning throng. Anonymous unless he spoke—but there should be no need for speech, until he reached Lavender House. Until then, the swirl of Barbican Street rose round him, dark and intoxicating as the beer-drenched air.

A trio of laughing men brushed by him, leaving a smell of yeast, sweat, and fresh bread in their wake—bakers.

"D'ye hear what that *bitch* said to me?" one was demanding in mock outrage. "How he dares!"

"Ah, come on, then, Betty. Ye don't want 'em smackin' your sweet round arse, don't wave it about!"

"Wave it—I'll wave you, you cheeky cull!"

They disappeared into the dark, laughing and shoving each other. Grey walked on, feeling suddenly more comfortable, despite the seriousness of his errand.

Mollies. There were four or five molly-walks in London, well-known to those so inclined, but it had been a long time since he had entered one past dark. Of the six taverns on Barbican Street, three at least were molly-houses, patronized by men who sought food and drink and the enjoyment of one another's companionship—and one another's flesh—unashamed in like company.

Laughter lapped round him as he passed unnoticed, and here and there he caught the "maiden names" many mollies used among themselves, exchanged in joke or casual insinuation. Nancy, Fanny, Betty, Mrs. Anne, Miss Thing ... he found himself smiling at the boisterous badinage he overheard, though he had never been inclined to that particular fancy himself.

Was Joseph Trevelyan so inclined? He would have sworn not; even now, he found the notion inconceivable. Still, he knew that almost all his own acquaintance in London society and army circles would swear with one voice on a Bible that Lord John Grey would never, could not possibly ...

"Would you *look* at our Miss Irons tonight?" A carrying voice, raised in grudging admiration, made him turn his head. Holding riotous court in the torchlit yard of the Three Goats was "Miss Irons"—a stout young man with broad shoulders and a bulbous nose, who had evidently paused with his companions for refreshment en route to a masquerade at Vauxhall.

Powdered and painted with joyous abandon, and rigged out in a gown of crimson satin with a ruffled headdress in cloth of gold, Miss Irons was presently seated on a barrel, from which perch she was rejecting the devotions of several masked gentlemen, with an air of flirtatious scorn that would have suited a duchess.

Grey came up short at the sight, then, recollecting himself, faded hastily across the road, seeking to disappear into the shadows.

Despite the finery, he recognized "Miss Irons"—who was by day one Egbert Jones, the cheerful young Welsh blacksmith who had come to repair the wrought-iron fence around his mother's herb garden. He rather thought that Miss Irons might recognize him in turn despite his disguise—and in her current well-lubricated mood, this was the last thing he desired to happen.

He reached the refuge of the bridge, helpfully shadowed by tall stone pillars at either end, and ducked behind one. His heart was thumping and his cheeks flushed, from alarm rather than exertion. No shout came from behind, though, and he leaned over to brace his hands upon the wall, letting the cool air off the river rise over his heated face.

A pungent smell of sewage and decay rose, too. Ten feet below the arch of the bridge, the dark and fetid waters of the Fleet crawled past, reminding him of Tim O'Connell's sordid end, and he straightened, slowly.

What had that end been? A spy's wages, paid in blood to prevent the threat of disclosure? Or something more personal?

Very personal. The thought came to him with sudden certainty, as he saw once more in memory that heelprint on O'Connell's forehead. Anyone might have killed the Sergeant, for any of several motives—but that final indignity was a deliberate insult, left as signature to the crime.

Scanlon's hands were unmarked; so were Francine O'Connell's. But O'Connell's death had come at the hands of more than one, and the Irish gathered like fleas in the city; where you found one, there were a dozen more nearby. Scanlon doubtless had friends or relations. He should very much like to examine the heels of Scanlon's shoes.

There were several men standing, as he was, near the wall; one turned aside, tugging at his breeches as though to make water, another sidling toward him. Grey felt the nearness of someone at his own shoulder, and turned his back sharply; he felt the hesitation of the man behind him, and then the small huff of breath, an audible shrug, as the stranger turned away.

Best to keep walking. He had barely resumed his journey, though, when he heard a startled exclamation from the shadows a few feet behind him, followed by a brief scuffling noise.

"Oh, you bold pullet!"

"What are—hey! Mmph!"

"Oh? Well, if you'd rather, my dear ..."

"Oy! Leggo!"

The agitated voice raised the hairs on the nape of Grey's neck in recognition. He whirled on his heel and was moving toward the altercation by reflex, before his conscious mind had realized what he was about.

Two shadowy figures swayed together, grappling and shuffling. He seized the taller of these just above the elbow, gripping hard.

"Leave him," he said, in his soldier's voice. The steel of it made the man start and step back, shaking off Grey's grip. Pale moonlight showed a long face, caught between puzzlement and anger.

"Why, I wasn't but—"

"Leave him," Grey repeated, more softly, but with no less menace. The man's face changed, assuming an air of injured dignity, as he did up his breeches.

"Sorry, I'm sure. Didn't know he was your cull." He turned away, rubbing ostentatiously at his arm, but Grey paid no attention, being

otherwise concerned.

"What in Christ's name are you doing here?" he said, keeping his voice low.

Tom Byrd appeared not to have heard; his round face was openmouthed with amazement.

"That bloke come straight up to me and put his pego into me hand!" He stared into his open palm, as though expecting to find the object in question still within his grasp.

"Oh?"

"Yes! I swear as a Christian, he did! And then he kissed me, and went for to put his hand into me breeches and grabbed me by the bollocks! Whatever would he want to do that for?"

Grey was tempted to reply that he had not the slightest idea, but instead took Byrd by the arm and towed him out of earshot of the interested parties on the bridge.

"I repeat—what are you doing here?" he asked, as they reached the refuge of a residence whose gate was sheltered by a pair of flowering laburnums, white in the moonlight.

"Oh, ah." Byrd was recovering rapidly from his shock. He rubbed the palm of his hand on his thigh and stood up straight.

"Well, sir—me lord, I mean—I saw you go out, and thought as how you might have need of someone at your back, as it was. I mean"—he darted a quick glance at Grey's unorthodox costume—"I thought you must be headin' to somewhere as might be dangerous." He looked back over his shoulder at the bridge, obviously feeling that recent events there had confirmed this suspicion.

"I assure you, Tom, I am in no danger." Byrd was; while most mollies were simply looking for a good time, there was rough trade to be found in such places and persons who would not take no for an answer—to say nothing of simple footpads.

Grey glanced down the street; he could not send the boy back past the taverns, not alone.

"Come with me, then," he said, making up his mind upon the moment. "You may accompany me to the house; from there, you will go home."

Byrd followed him without demur; Grey was obliged to take the young man's arm and draw him up beside—otherwise the boy fell by habit into step behind him, which would not do.

A middle-aged man in a cocked hat strolled past them, giving Byrd a penetrating glance. Grey felt the boy meet the glance, then jerk his

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eyes away.

"Me lord," he whispered.

"Yes?"

"These coves hereabouts. Are they ... sodomites?"
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"Many of them, yes."

Byrd asked no further questions. Grey let go the boy's arm after a bit, and they walked in silence through the quieter end of the street. Grey felt all his earlier tension return, made the more uncomfortable for the brief interlude before Byrd's appearance had recalled him to himself.

He had not remembered. Hardly surprising; he had done his best to forget those years after Hector's death. He had sleepwalked through the year after Culloden, spent with Cumberland's troops as they cleansed the Highlands of rebels, doing his soldier's duty, but doing it as in a dream. Returning at last to London, though, he could no longer keep from waking to the reality of a world in which Hector was not.

He had come here in that bad time, looking for surcease at best, oblivion at worst. He had found the latter, both in liquor and in flesh, and realized his luck in surviving both experiences unscathed—though at the time, survival had been the least of his concerns.

What he had forgotten in the years since then, though, was the simple, unutterable comfort of existing—for however brief a time—without pretense. With Byrd's appearance, he felt that he had hastily clapped on a mask, but wore it now somewhat awry.

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"Me lord?"
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"Yes?"

Byrd drew a deep and trembling breath, which made Grey turn to look at the boy. Dark as their surroundings were, his strong emotion was evident in the clenched fists.

"Me brother. Jack. D'ye think he—have ye come to find him here?" Byrd blurted.

"No." Grey hesitated, then touched Byrd's shoulder gently. "Have you any reason to suppose that he would be here—or in another such place?"

Byrd shook his head, not in negation, but in sheer helplessness.

"I dunno. I never—but I never thought ... I dunno, sir, that's the truth."

"Has he a woman? A girl, perhaps, with whom he walks out?"

"No," Byrd said miserably. "But he's a cove to save his money, Jack. Always said as how he'd take a wife when he could afford one, and before then why tempt trouble?"

"Your brother sounds a wise man," Grey said, letting the hint of a smile show in his voice. "And an honorable one."

Byrd drew another deep breath, and swiped his knuckles furtively beneath his nose.

"Aye, sir, Jack's that."

"Well, then." Grey turned away, but waited for a moment, until Byrd moved to follow.

Lavender House was large, but in no way ostentatious. Only the marble tubs of fragrant lavender that stood on either side of its door distinguished it in any way from the houses to either side. The curtains were drawn, but shadows passed now and then beyond them, and the murmur of male conversation and occasional bursts of laughter seeped through the hanging velvet.

"It sounds like what goes on at those gentlemen's clubs in Curzon Street," Byrd said, sounding faintly puzzled. "I've heard 'em."

"It is a gentlemen's club," Grey replied, with a certain grimness. "For gentlemen of a particular sort." He removed his hat, and, untying his hair, shook it free over his shoulders; the time for disguise was past.

"Now you must go home, Tom." He pointed the way, across the park. "Do you see that light, at the end? Just beyond is an alley; it will take you to a main street. Here—take some money for a cab."

Byrd accepted the coin, but shook his head.

"No, me lord. I'll go to the door with you."

He glanced at Byrd, surprised. There was sufficient light from the curtained windows to see both the dried tears on Byrd's round face and the determined expression under them.

"I mean to be sure as these sodomitical sons of bitches shall be aware that somebody knows where you are. Just in case, me lord."

The door opened promptly to his knock, revealing a liveried butler, who gave Grey's clothes a disparaging glance. Then the man's eyes rose to his face, and Grey saw the subtle change of expression. Grey was not one to trade on his looks, but he was aware of their effect in some quarters.

"Good evening," he said, stepping across the threshold as though he owned the place. "I wish to speak to the current proprietor of this

establishment."

The butler gave way in astonishment, and Grey saw the man's calculations undergo a rapid shift in the face of his accent and manner, so much at variance with his dress. Still, the man had been well-trained, and wasn't to be so easily bamboozled.

"Indeed, sir," the butler said, not quite bowing. "And your name?" "George Everett," Grey said.

The butler's face went blank.

"Indeed, sir," he said woodenly. He hesitated, plainly uncertain what to do. Grey didn't recognize the man, but the man clearly had known George—or known of him.

"Give that name to your master, if you please," Grey said pleasantly. "I will await him in the library."

On a table by the door stood the clockwork figure Rab the chairman had noted—not an orrery, but a clockwork man, elaborately enameled and gilded, made to drop his breeches and bend over when the key was wound. Grey made as though to go to the left of this figure, toward where he knew the library to be. The butler put out a hand as though to stop him, but then halted, distracted by something outside.

"Who is that?" he said, thoroughly startled.

Grey turned to see Tom Byrd standing at the edge of the lightspill from the door, glowering fiercely, fists clenched and his jaw set in a way that brought his lower teeth up to fix in the flesh of his upper lip. Mud-spattered from his adventures, he looked like a gargoyle knocked from his perch.

"That, sir, is my valet," Grey said politely, and, turning, strode down the hall.

There were a few men in the library, sprawled in chairs near the hearth, chatting over their newspapers and brandy. It might have been the library at the Beefsteak, save that conversation stopped abruptly with Grey's entrance, and half a dozen pairs of eyes fixed upon him in open appraisal.

Fortunately, he recognized none of them, nor they him.

"Gentlemen," he said, bowing. "Your servant." He turned at once to the sideboard, where the decanters stood, and in defiance of convention and good manners, poured out a glass of some liquid, not taking the time to ascertain what it was. He turned back to find them all still staring at him, trying to reconcile the contradictions of his appearance, his manner, and his voice. He stared back.

One of the men recovered himself quickly, and rose from his seat.

"Welcome ... sir."

"And what's your name, sweet boy?" another chimed in, smiling as he tossed down his paper.

"That is my own affair ... sir." Grey returned the smile, with a razor edge to it, and took a sip of his drink. It was porter, curse the luck.

The rest of them had risen now and came to circle round him, nosing in the manner of dogs smelling something freshly dead. Half curious, half wary, thoroughly intrigued. He felt a trickle of sweat roll down the nape of his neck, and a nervous clenching of the belly. All of them were dressed quite ordinarily, though that meant nothing. Lavender House had many rooms, and catered to an assortment of fancies.

All were well-dressed, but none of them wore wigs or paint, and a couple showed some disorder in their dress; stocks discarded, and shirts and waistcoats opened to allow liberties that wouldn't be countenanced in the Beefsteak.

The golden-haired youth to his left was studying him with narrowed eyes and obvious appetite; the stocky brown-haired lad saw, and didn't like it. Grey saw him move closer, deliberately jostling Goldie-Locks, to distract his attention. Goldie-Locks put a soothing hand on his playfellow's leg, but didn't take his eyes off Grey.

"Well, if you will not give your name, let me make you a present of mine." A curly-haired young man with a sweet mouth and soft brown eyes stepped forward, smiling, and took his hand. "Percy Wainwright—at your service, ma'am." He bent over Grey's hand in the most graceful of gestures, and kissed the knuckles.

The feel of the boy's warm breath on his skin made the hairs stand up on Grey's forearm. He would have liked to grasp Percy's hand and draw him in, but that wouldn't do, not just now.

He let his own hand lie inert in Wainwright's for a moment, to offer neither insult nor invitation, then drew it back.

"Your servant ... madam."

That made them laugh, though still with an edge of wariness. They were not sure yet if he was fish or fowl, and he meant to keep it that way as long as possible.

He was a good deal more cautious now than he had been when George Everett had first brought him here. Then he had not cared for anything in particular—save George, perhaps. Now, having come so close to losing his for good, he had some appreciation for the value of a reputation; not merely his, but those of his family and his regiment, as well.

"What brings you here, my dear?" Goldie-Locks stepped closer, blue eyes burning like twin candle flames.

"Looking for a lady," Grey drawled, leaning back against the sideboard in assumed casualness. "In a green velvet gown."

There was a sputter of laughter at this, and glances among them, but nothing that looked like dawning recognition.

"Green doesn't suit me," Goldie-Locks said, and licked a pointed tongue briefly across his upper lip. "But I've a *charming* blue satin with laced pinners that I'm *sure* you'd like."

"Oh, I'm sure," the brown-haired boy said, eyeing both Grey and Goldie-Locks with clear dislike. "You cunt, Neil."

"Language, ladies, language." Percy Wainwright edged Goldie-Locks back with a deft elbow, smiling at Grey. "This lady in green—have you a name for her?"

"Josephine, I believe," Grey said, glancing from one face to another. "Josephine, from Cornwall."

That provoked a chorus of mildly derisive "Oooh"s, and one man began to sing "My Little Black Ewe," in an off-key voice. Then the door opened, and everyone turned to see who had come in.

It was Richard Caswell, the proprietor of Lavender House. Grey knew him at once—and he recalled Grey, it was plain. Still, Caswell didn't greet him by name, but merely nodded pleasantly.

"Seppings said that you wished to speak with me. If you would care to join me?..." Caswell stood aside, indicating the door.

A low whistle of insinuating admiration followed Grey as he left, succeeded by whoops of laughter.

You cunt, Neil, he thought, and then dismissed all thought of anything save the matter at hand.



Chapter 10

The Affairs of Men

"I was not sure that you still owned this place, else I should have inquired for you by name." Grey settled himself into the chair indicated by his host, and took the opportunity to discard the unwanted glass of porter onto a nearby table crowded with knickknacks.

"Surprised I'm still alive, I expect," Caswell said dryly, taking his own seat across the hearth.

This was the truth, and Grey didn't bother to deny it. The fire burned low and lent a deceptively ruddy hue to Caswell's wasted features, but Grey had seen him by clear candlelight in the library. He looked worse than he had when last seen, years before—but not much worse.

"You don't look a day over a thousand, Mother Caswell," Grey said lightly. That was the truth, too; beneath his modish bag-wig and an extravagant suit of striped blue silk, the man might as well have been an Egyptian mummy. Bony brown wrists and hands like bundles of dry sticks protruded from the sleeves; while the suit had undoubtedly been made by an excellent tailor, it hung upon his shrunken form like a scarecrow's burlap.

"You shameless flatterer." Caswell looked him over, amusement flickering in his eyes. "Can't say the same for you, my dear. You look as fresh and innocent as the day I first saw you. How old were you then, eighteen?" Caswell's eyes were just the same; small, black, and clever, perpetually bloodshot from smoke and late hours, sunk in pouches of deep violet.

"I lead a wholesome life. Keeps the skin clear."

Caswell laughed, then began to cough. With a practiced economy of motion, he drew a crumpled handkerchief from his waistcoat and clapped it to his mouth. He lifted a sketchy brow at Grey, half-shrugging as though to apologize for the delay of their conversation, meanwhile suffering the racking spasms with the indifference of long custom.

The coughing done at last, he inspected the resultant blood spots on the handkerchief and, evidently finding them no worse than expected, tossed the cloth into the fire.

"I need a drink," he said hoarsely, rising from his chair and heading toward the big mahogany desk, where a silver tray held a decanter and several glasses.

Unlike Magda's sanctum, Caswell's room held nothing at all that indicated the nature of Lavender House or of its members; it might have belonged to a director of the Bank of London, for all its soberness and elegance of furnishing.

"You're not enjoying that swill, are you?" Caswell nodded toward the discarded glass of porter. He filled a pair of crystal wineglasses with a deep crimson liquid, and held one out. "Here, have some of this."

Grey took the proffered glass with a sense of unreality; he had taken wine here, in this room, when George had first brought him to Lavender House—a prelude to their retiring to one of the chambers upstairs. The sense of mild disorientation was succeeded by a sharp shock when he took the first sip.

"That's very good," he said, holding the glass up to the fire as though to appraise the color. "What is it?"

"Don't know the name," Caswell said, sniffing at the wine with appreciation. "German stuff, not bad. Had it before?"

Grey closed his eyes and drank deeply, frowning and affecting to wash it about his tongue in an effort at placement. Not that he entertained the slightest doubt. He had a good nose for wine, and a better palate—and he had drunk enough of this particular vintage with Nessie to be more than sure of recognizing it again.

"Might have," he said, opening his eyes and meeting Caswell's penetrating gaze with an innocent blink. "Can't recall. Decent stuff, though. Where'd you find it?"

"One of our members prefers it. He brings it by the cask, and we keep it in the cellar for him. Fond of it myself." Caswell took another sip, then set down his glass. "Well ... my lord. How might I have the

pleasure of serving you?" The fleshless lips rose in a smile. "Do you mean to seek membership in the Lavender Club? I'm sure the committee would look upon your application with the most cordial favor."

"Was that the committee I met in the library?" Grey asked dryly.

"Some of them." Caswell uttered a short laugh, but choked it off, unwilling to start another coughing fit. "Mind you, they might require you to submit to a series of personal interviews, but I'm sure you would have no objection to that?"

The glass felt slippery in his hand. He'd once seen a young man bent over a leather ottoman in that library and subjected to a number of personal interviews, to the vast entertainment of all present. They still had the ottoman; he'd noticed.

"I am exceedingly flattered at the suggestion," he said politely. "As it happens, though, what I require at the moment is information, rather than companionship, delightful as that prospect might be."

Caswell coughed, sitting up a little straighter. The smile was still there, but the black eyes had grown brighter.

"Yes?" he said. Grey could almost hear the whisper of steel drawn from a scabbard. The *pourparlers* were done; let the duel begin.

"The Honorable Mr. Trevelyan," he said, laying his own blade against Caswell's. "He comes here regularly; I know that already. I wish to know whom he meets."

Caswell actually blinked, not having expected such an immediate thrust, but recovered smoothly with a sidestep.

"Trevelyan? I know no one of that name."

"Oh, you know him. Whether he uses that name here is of no account; you know everything of interest about everyone who comes here. Certainly you know their real surnames."

"Flatterer," Caswell said again, though he looked less amused.

"The gentlemen in the library were not reserved," Grey said, trying for advantage. "If I were to seek them out, outside the confines of your house, I imagine some of them might tell me what I wish to know."

Caswell laughed, deeply enough to start a small fit of coughing.

"No, they won't," Caswell wheezed, groping for a fresh handkerchief. He mopped at his eyes and his shriveled mouth, drawn up in a smile once more. "No doubt one or two would tell you anything they thought you'd like to hear, if it would loosen your breeches, but they won't tell you that."

"Won't they?" Grey affected indifference, sipping at his wine. "Trevelyan's affairs must be of more importance than I thought, if it's worth your threatening your members to keep his secrets."

"Oh, perish the thought, perish the thought!" Caswell flapped a bony hand. "Threats? Me? You know better than that, dear boy. If I were given to threats, I should have ended in the Fleet Ditch with my head caved in, long since."

A tingle of alertness shot through Grey at this remark, though he fought to keep his face blandly expressionless. Was this mere hyperbole, or warning? Caswell's withered face gave nothing away, though the sparkling eyes watched his own for any clue to his intent.

He breathed deeply to slow the rapid beating of his heart, and took another sip of wine. It might be nothing more than a coincidence, a mere accident of speech; the Fleet was at hand, after all—and for what it was worth, Caswell was correct: He serviced men of wealth and influence, and if he were given to threats or blackmail, he would have been quietly put out of business long since, in one way or another.

Information, though, was something else. George had once told him that Caswell's main stock in trade was information—and the profits from Lavender House likely were not great enough to provide the lavish furnishings evident in Caswell's private quarters. *Everyone knows Dickie Caswell*, George had said, lolling indolently on the bed in one of the upstairs rooms. *And Dickie knows everyone—and everything. Anything you want to know—for a price.*

"Your tact and discretion are most commendable," Grey said, seeking new footing for a fresh attack. "Why do you say they will not tell me, though?"

"Why, because it isn't true," Caswell replied promptly. "They've never seen a man called Trevelyan here—how could they tell you anything about him?"

"Not a man, no. I rather imagine they have seen him as a woman."

He felt a small rush of exhilaration, seeing the violet swags under Caswell's eyes deepen in hue as the color paled from his cheeks. First blood; he'd pinked his man.

"In a green velvet gown," he added, pressing the advantage. "I told you—I know he comes here; the fact is not in question."

"You are quite mistaken," Caswell said, but a cough bubbling to the surface gave the words a quavering aspect.

"Let it go, Dickie," Grey said, flicking his rapier with a touch of

insolence. He lounged a little, looking tolerantly over his glass. "I say I know; you will scarcely convince me I do not. I require only a few small additional details."

"But-"

"You need not trouble yourself that you will be blamed. If I have learned the main facts about Trevelyan from another source—as indeed I have—then why should I not have learned everything from this same source?"

Caswell had opened his mouth to say something, but instead narrowed his eyes and pursed his mouth in thought.

"Nor do you need to fear that I mean any harm to Mr. Trevelyan. He is about to become a part of my family, after all—perhaps you are aware that he is engaged to my cousin?"

Caswell nodded, almost imperceptibly. His mouth was pursed so tightly that it resembled nothing so much as a dog's anus, which Grey thought very disagreeable. Still, it scarcely mattered what the evil old creature looked like, so long as he coughed up the necessary details.

"I am sure you will understand that my efforts in this regard are intended solely to protect my family." Grey glanced away, toward a massive silver epergne filled with hothouse fruit, then back at Caswell. Time for the *coup*.

"So, then," he said, spreading his hands with a graceful gesture. "It remains only to decide the price, does it not?"

Caswell made a deep, catarrhal noise, and spat thickly into a new handkerchief, which he then balled up and cast into the fire after its fellows. Grey thought cynically that he must require a good deal of money merely to keep himself in linen.

"The price." Caswell took a deep swallow of wine and put down the glass, licking his lips. "What do you have to offer? Always assuming that I have something to sell, mind."

No more pretence of ignorance. The duel was over. Grey could not help a brief sigh, and was surprised to discover that not only were his palms damp but that he was sweating freely beneath his shirt, though the room was not warm.

"I have money—" he began, but Caswell interrupted him.

"Trevelyan gives me money. A lot of money. What else can you offer me?"

The small black eyes were fixed on him, unblinking, and he saw the tip of Caswell's tongue steal out, barely visible, to lick away a drop of wine from the corner of his mouth. Sweet Jesus. He sat dumbstruck for an instant, caught in those eyes, then glanced down, as though suddenly remembering his own wine. He lifted his glass, lowering his lashes to hide his eyes.

In defense of King, country, and family, he would unhesitatingly have sacrificed his virtue to Nessie, had that been required. If it was a question of Olivia marrying a man with syphilis and half the British army being exterminated in battle, versus himself experiencing a "personal interview" with Richard Caswell, though, he rather thought Olivia and the King had best look to their own devices.

He put down his glass, hoping that this conclusion was not reflected upon his features.

"I have something other than money," he said, meeting Caswell's gaze squarely. "Do you want to know how George Everett really died?"

If there was a flicker of disappointment in those black marble orbs, it was swamped at once beneath a wave of interest. Caswell tried to hide it, but there was no disguising the glint of curiosity, mixed with avarice.

"I heard that it was a hunting accident; broke his neck out in the country. Where was it? Wyvern?"

"Francis Dashwood's place—Medmenham Abbey. It wasn't his neck, and it was no accident. He was killed on purpose—a sword-thrust through the heart. I was there."

These last three words were dropped like pebbles into a lake; he could feel their impact send ripples through the air of the room. Caswell sat immobile, scarcely breathing, contemplating the possibilities.

"Dashwood," he whispered at last. "The Hellfire Club?"

Grey nodded. "I can tell you who was there—and everything that happened that night at Medmenham. *Everything*."

Caswell fairly quivered with excitement, black eyes moist.

George had been right. Caswell was one of those who loved secrets, who hoarded information, who kept confidential information for the sheer joy of knowing things that no one else knew. And when the time might come that such things could be sold for a profit ...

"Have we a bargain, Dickie?"

That recalled Caswell somewhat to himself. He took a deep breath, coughed twice, and nodded, pushing back his chair.

"That we have, my little love. Come along, then."

The upper floors consisted mostly of private rooms; Grey couldn't tell whether much had been changed—he had been in no condition to notice very much on the occasions of his previous visits to Lavender House.

Tonight was different; he noticed everything.

It was peculiar, he thought, following Caswell through an upper hall. The feel of this house was quite different from that of the brothel, even though the purpose of the establishments was the same. He could hear music below, and intimate sounds in some of the rooms they passed—and yet it was not the same at all.

Magda's brothel had been much more explicit, with everything in the place intended to provoke libidinous intent. No molly-house he had ever been in did such things—there was seldom any ornamentation, nor even much furnishing beyond the simplest of beds. Sometimes, not even that; many were no more than taverns, with a room opening off the main taproom, where men could repair for sport, often to the applause and shouted comments of onlookers in the tavern.

He believed that even very poor brothels had doors. Was it that women insisted upon privacy, he wondered? Yet he doubted that many whores found stimulation in the sorts of objects Magda provided for the delectation of her customers. Perhaps there truly was a difference between men who were lured by women, and those who preferred the touch of their own sex? Or was it the women—did they perhaps require some decoration of the exchange?

As far as sexual feeling went ... this house fairly vibrated with it. There were male voices and the scents of men everywhere; two lovers embraced at the end of the corridor, entwined against a wall, and his own skin prickled and jumped; he could not stop sweating.

Caswell led him to a staircase, past the lovers. One was Goldie-Locks, Neil the Cunt, who looked up, disheveled, mouth swollen, and gave him a languorous smile before returning to his companion—who was not the brown-haired lad. Grey carefully did not look back as they started up the stair.

Things were quieter on the topmost floor of the house. The furnishing seemed more luxurious, as well; a wide oriental carpet ran the length of the corridor, and tasteful pictures decorated the walls,

above small tables that held vases of flowers.

"Up here, we have several suites of rooms; sometimes a gentleman will come in from the provinces to stay for a few days, a week ..."

"Quite the little home away from home. I see. And Trevelyan engages one of these suites now and again?"

"Oh, no." Caswell stopped at a varnished door, and shook loose a large key from the bunch he carried. "He keeps this particular suite on a permanent basis."

The door swung open on darkness, showing the pale rectangle of a window on the far wall. It had clouded over, and Grey could see the moon, now high and small in the sky, nearly lost amid layers of hazy cloud.

Caswell had brought a taper; he touched it to a candlestick near the door, and the light caught and grew, shedding a wavering light over a large room with a canopied bed. The room was clean and empty; Grey breathed in, but smelled nothing other than wax and floor polish, with a faint whiff of long-dead fires. The hearth was freshly swept, and a fire laid, but the room was cold; clearly no one had been here recently.

Grey prowled the room, but there was no evidence of its occupants.

"Does he entertain the same companion each time?" he asked. The keeping of a suite argued some long-term affair.

"Yes, I believe he does." There was an odd tone in Caswell's voice that made him glance sharply at the man.

"You believe? You have not seen his companion?"

"No—he is very particular, our Mr. Trevelyan." Caswell's voice was ironic. "He always arrives first, changes his clothes, and then goes down to wait near the door. He brings his companion in and up the stairs at once; all the servants have instructions to be elsewhere."

That was a disappointment. He had hoped for a name. Still, a tendency to thoroughness made him turn back to Caswell, probing for further information.

"I am sure your servants are meticulous in observing your instructions," he said. "But you, Dickie? Surely you don't expect me to believe that anyone comes into your house without your finding out everything there is to know about them. You've only heard my Christian name before, to my knowledge—and yet, if you know about Trevelyan's engagement to my cousin, plainly you know who I am."

"Oh, yes—my lord." Caswell smiled, lips drawn into a puckish point. The bargain struck, he was enjoying his revelations as much as

he had his earlier reticence.

"You are right, to a degree. In fact, I do not know the name of Mr. Trevelyan's *inamorata*; he is very careful. I do, however, know one rather important thing about her."

"Which is?"

"That she is an inamorata—rather than an inamorato."

Grey stared at him for an instant, deciphering this.

"What? Trevelyan is meeting a woman? A real woman? Here?"

Caswell inclined his head, hands folded gravely at his waist like a butler.

"How do you know?" Grey demanded. "Are you sure?"

The candlelight danced like laughter in Caswell's small black eyes.

"Ever smelt a woman? Close to, I mean." Caswell shook his head, the loose folds of skin on his neck quivering with the movement. "Let alone a room where someone's been swiving one of the creatures for hours on end. Of course I'm sure."

"Of course you are," Grey murmured, repelled by the mental image of Caswell nosing ratlike through sheets and pillows in the vacated rooms of his house, pilfering crumbs of information from the rubble left by careless love.

"She has dark hair," Caswell offered helpfully. "Nearly black. Your cousin is fair, I believe?"

Grey didn't bother answering that.

"And?" he asked tersely.

Caswell pursed his lips, considering.

"She wears considerable paint—but I cannot say, of course, whether that is her normal habit, or part of the guise she adopts when coming here."

Grey nodded, taking the point. Those mollies who liked to dress as women normally were painted like French noblewomen; a woman hoping to be mistaken for one would likely do the same.

"And?"

"She wears a very expensive scent. Civet, vetiver, and orange, if I am not mistaken." Caswell cast his eyes up toward the ceiling, considering. "Oh, yes—she has a taste for that German wine I gave you."

"You said you kept it for a member. Trevelyan, I presume? How do you know it isn't he alone who drinks it?"

Caswell's hairy nostrils quivered with amusement.

"A man who drank as much as is brought up to this suite would be

incapable for days. And judging from the evidence"—he nodded delicately at the bed—"our Mr. Trevelyan is far from incapable."

"She arrives by sedan chair?" Grey asked, ignoring the allusion.

"Yes. Different bearers each time, though; if she keeps men of her own, she does not use them when coming here—which argues a high degree of discretion, does it not?"

A lady with a good deal to lose, were the *affaire* discovered. But the intricacy of Trevelyan's arrangements was sufficient to tell him that already.

"And that is all I know," Caswell said, in tones of finality. "Now, as to your part of the bargain, my lord?..."

His mind still reeling from the shock of revelation, Grey recalled his promise to Tom Byrd and gathered sufficient wits to ask one more question, pulled almost at random from the swirl of fact and speculation that presently inhabited his cranium.

"All you know about the woman. About Mr. Trevelyan, though—have you ever seen a man with him, a servant? Somewhat taller than myself, lean-faced and dark, with a missing eyetooth on the left side?"

Caswell looked surprised.

"A servant?" He frowned, ransacking his memory. "No. I ... no, wait. Yes ... yes, I believe I have seen the man, though I think he has come only once." He looked up, nodding with decision.

"Yes, that was it; he came to fetch his master, with a note of some kind—some emergency to do with business, I think. I sent him down to the kitchens to wait for Trevelyan—he was comely enough, tooth or no, but I rather thought he was not disposed to such sport as he might encounter abovestairs."

Tom Byrd would be relieved to hear that expert opinion, Grey thought.

"When was this? Do you recall?"

Caswell's lips puckered in thought, causing Grey briefly to avert his glance.

"In late April, I think it was, though I cannot—oh. Yes, I can be sure." He grinned, triumphantly displaying a set of decaying teeth. "That was it. He brought word of the Austrian defeat at Prague, arrived by special courier. The newspapers had it within days, but naturally Mr. Trevelyan would wish to know of it at once."

Grey nodded. For a man with Trevelyan's business interests, information like that would be worth its weight in gold—or even more, depending on its timeliness.

"One last thing, then. When he left so hastily—did the woman leave then, too? And did she go with him, rather than seeking separate transport?"

Caswell was obliged to ponder that one for a moment, leaning against the wall.

"Ye-es, they did leave together," he said at last. "I seem to recall that the servant ran off to fetch a hired carriage, and they entered it together. She'd a shawl over her head. Quite small, though; I might easily have taken her for a boy—save that her figure was quite rounded."

Caswell drew himself up straight then, and cast a last glance about the vacant room, as though to satisfy himself that it would yield no further secrets.

"Well, that's my end of the bargain kept, my love. And yours?" His hand hovered over the candlestick, scrawny claw poised to pinch out the flame. Grey saw the polished obsidian eyes fix on him in invitation, and was all too conscious of the large bed, close behind him.

"Of course," Grey said, moving purposefully toward the door. "Shall we adjourn to your office?"

Caswell's expression might have been termed a pout, had he had the fullness of lip to achieve such a thing.

"If you insist," he said with a sigh, and extinguished the candle in a burst of fragrant smoke.

Dawn was beginning to lighten over the housetops of London by the time Grey left Dickie Caswell's sanctum, alone. He paused at the end of the corridor, resting his forehead against the cool glass of the casement, watching the City as it emerged by imperceptible degrees from its cloak of night. Muted by clouds that had thickened during the night, the light grew in shades of gray, relieved only by the faintest tinge of pink over the distant Thames. In his present state of mind, it reminded Grey of the last vestiges of life fading from a corpse's cheeks.

Caswell had been delighted with his half of the bargain, as well he should be. Grey had held back nothing of his Medmenham adventures, save the name of the man who had actually killed George Everett. There, he said only that the man had been robed and masked;

impossible to say for sure who it had been.

He felt no compunction in thus blackening George's name; to his manner of thinking, George had accomplished that reasonably well for himself—and if a posthumous revelation of his actions could help to save the innocent, that might compensate in some small way for the innocent lives Everett had taken or ruined as the price of his ambition.

As for Dashwood and the others ... let them look to themselves. *He who sups wi' the De'il, needs bring a lang spoon*. Grey smiled faintly, hearing the Scots proverb in memory. Jamie Fraser had said it on the occasion of their first meal together—casting Grey as the Devil, he supposed, though he had not asked.

Grey was not a religious man, but he harbored a persistent vision: an avenging angel presiding over a balance on which the deeds of a man's life were weighed—the bad to one side, the good to the other—and George Everett stood before the angel naked, bound and wide-eyed, waiting to see where the wavering balance might finally come to rest. He hoped this night's work should be laid to George's credit, and wondered briefly how long the accounting might go on, if it was true that a man's deeds lived after him.

Jamie Fraser had told him once of purgatory, that Catholic conception of a place prior to final judgment, where souls remained for a time after death, and where the fate of a soul might still be affected by the prayers and Masses said for it. Perhaps it was true; a place where the soul waited, while each action taken during life played itself out, the unexpected consequences and complications following one another like a collapsing chain of dominoes down through the years. But that would imply that a man was responsible not only for his conscious actions, but for all the good and evil that might spring from them forever, unintended and unforeseen; a terrible thought.

He straightened, feeling at once drained and keyed up. He was exhausted, but completely awake—in fact, sleep had never seemed so far away. Every nerve was raw, and all his muscles ached with unrelieved tension.

The house lay silent around him, its inhabitants still sleeping the drugged sleep of wine and sated sensuality. Rain began to fall, the soft ping of raindrops striking the glass accompanied by a harsh, fresh scent that came cold through the cracks of the casement, cutting through the stale air of the house and through the fog that filled his brain.

"Nothing like a long walk home in a driving rain to clear the cobwebs," he murmured to himself. He had left his hat somewhere—perhaps in the library—but felt no desire to go in search of it. He made his way to the stair, down to the second floor, and along the gallery toward the main staircase that would take him down to the door.

The door of one of the rooms on the gallery was open, and as he passed by, a shadow fell across the boards at his feet. He glanced up and met the eye of a young man who lounged in the doorway, clad in nothing but his shirt, dark curls loose upon his shoulders. The young man's eyes, black and long-lashed, passed over him, and he felt the heat of them on his skin.

He made as though to go by, but the young man reached out and grasped him by the arm.

"Come in," the young man said softly.

"No, I—"

"Come. For a moment only."

The young man stepped out onto the gallery, his bare feet long and graceful, standing so close that his thigh pressed Grey's. He leaned forward, and the warmth of his breath brushed Grey's ear, the tip of his tongue touched the whorl of it with a crackling sound like the spark that springs from the fingers on a dry day when metal is touched.

"Come," he murmured, and stepped backward, drawing Grey after him into the room.

It was clean and plainly furnished, but he saw nothing save the dark eyes, so close, and the hand that moved from his arm, sliding down to entwine its fingers with his own, the swarthiness of it startling by contrast with his own fairness, the palm broad and hard against his.

Then the young man moved away and, smiling at Grey, took hold of the hem of the shirt and drew it upward over his head.

Grey felt as though the cloth of his stock were choking him. The room was cool, and yet a dew of sweat broke out on his body, hot damp in the small of his back, slick in the creases of his skin.

"What will you, sir?" the young man whispered, still smiling. He put down one hand and stroked himself, inviting.

Grey reached slowly up and fumbled for a moment with the fastening of his stock, until it suddenly came free, leaving his neck exposed, bare and vulnerable. Cool air struck his skin as he shed his coat and loosened his shirt; he felt gooseflesh prickle on his arms and

rush pell-mell down the length of his spine.

The young man knelt now on the bed. He turned his back and stretched himself catlike, arching, and the rain-light from the window played upon the broad flat muscle of thigh and shoulder, the groove of back and furrowed buttocks. He looked back over one shoulder, eyelids half-lowered, long and sleepy-looking.

The mattress gave beneath Grey's weight, and the young man's mouth moved under his, soft and wet.

"Shall I talk, sir?"

"No," Grey whispered, closing his eyes, pressing down with hips and hands. "Be silent. Pretend ... I am not here."



Chapter 11

German Red

There were, Grey calculated, approximately a thousand wineshops in the City of London. However, if one considered only those dealing in wines of quality, the number was likely more manageable. A brief inquiry with his own wine merchant proving unfruitful, though, he decided upon consultation with an expert.

"Mother—when you had the German evening last week, did you by any chance serve German wine?"

The Countess was sitting in her boudoir reading a book, stockinged feet comfortably propped upon the shaggy back of her favorite dog, an elderly spaniel named Eustace, who opened one sleepy eye and panted genially in response to Grey's entrance. She looked up at her son's appearance, and shoved the spectacles she wore for reading up onto her forehead, blinking a little at the shift from the world of the printed page.

"German wine? Well, yes; we had a nice Rhenish one, to go with the lamb. Why?"

"No red wine?"

"Three of them—but not German. Two French, and a rather raw Spanish; crude, but it went well with the sausages." Benedicta ran the tip of her tongue thoughtfully along her upper lip in recollection. "Captain von Namtzen didn't seem to like the sausages; very odd. But then, he's from Hanover. Perhaps I inadvertently had sausages done in the style of Saxony or Prussia, and he thought it an insult. I think Cook considers all Germans to be the same thing."

"Cook thinks that anyone who isn't an Englishman is a frog; she doesn't draw distinctions beyond that." Dismissing the cook's

prejudices for the moment, Grey unearthed a stool from under a heap of tattered books and manuscripts, and sat on it.

"I am in search of a German red—full-bodied, fruity nose, about the color of one of those roses." He pointed at the vase of deep-crimson roses spilling petals over his mother's mahogany secretary.

"Really? I don't believe I've ever even seen a German red wine, let alone tasted one—though I suppose they do exist." The Countess closed her book, keeping a finger between the pages to mark her place. "Are you planning your supper party? Olivia said you'd invited Joseph to dine with you and your friends—that was very kind of you, dear."

Grey felt as though he'd received a sudden punch to the midsection. Christ, he'd forgotten all about his invitation to Trevelyan.

"Whyever do you want a German wine, though?" The Countess laid her head on one side, one fair brow lifted in curiosity.

"That is another matter, quite separate," Grey said hastily. "Are you still getting your wine from Cannel's?"

"For the most part. Gentry's, now and then, and sometimes Hemshaw and Crook. Let me see, though ..." She ran the tip of a forefinger slowly down the bridge of her nose, then pressed the tip, having arrived at the sought-for conclusion.

"There is a newish wine merchant, rather small, down in Fish Street. The neighborhood isn't very nice, but they do have some quite extraordinary wines; things you can't find elsewhere. I should ask there, if I were you. Fraser et Cie is the name."

"Fraser?" It was a fairly common Scots name, after all. Still, the mere sound of it gave him a faint thrill. "I'll ask there. Thank you, Mother." He leaned forward to kiss her cheek, taking in her characteristic perfume: lily of the valley, mixed with ink—the latter fragrance more intense than usual, owing to the newness of the book in her lap.

"What's that you're reading?" he asked, glancing at it.

"Oh, young Edmund's latest bit of light entertainment," she said, closing the cover to display the title: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, by Edmund Burke. "I don't expect you'd like it—too frivolous by half." Taking up her silver penknife, she neatly cut the next page. "I have a new printing of John Cleland's Fanny Hill, though, if you find yourself in want of reading matter. You know, Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure?"

"Very amusing, Mother," he said tolerantly, scratching Eustace

behind the ears. "Do you mean to read the Cleland thing, or do you intend merely to leave it artfully displayed in the salon, in order to drive off Lady Roswell in a state of shock?"

"Oh, what a good idea!" she said, giving him a look of approval. "I hadn't thought of that. Unfortunately, it hasn't got the title on the cover, and she's much too stupidly incurious simply to pick up a book and open it."

She reached over and rummaged through the stacked books on her secretary, pulling out a handsome calf-bound quarto volume, which she handed to him.

"It's a special presentation edition," she explained. "Blank spine, plain cover. So one can read it in dull company, I suppose, without arousing suspicion—as long as one doesn't let the illustrations show, at least. Why don't you take it, though? I read it when it first came out, and you'll be needing some sort of present for Joseph's bachelor party. That seems rather appropriate, if half what I hear of such parties is true."

He had been about to rise, but stopped, holding the book.

"Mother," he said carefully. "About Mr. Trevelyan. Do you think Livy is terribly in love with him?"

She looked at him with raised brows; then, very slowly, closed her book, took her feet off Eustace, and sat up straight.

"Why?" she asked, in a tone that managed to communicate all of the wariness and cynical suspicion regarding the male sex that was the natural endowment of a woman who had raised four sons and buried two husbands.

"I ... have some reason to think that Mr. Trevelyan has ... an irregular attachment," he said carefully. "The matter is not yet quite certain."

The Countess inhaled deeply, closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them and regarded him with a pale, clear blue gaze of pragmatism, tinged only slightly with regret.

"He is a dozen years her senior; it would be not merely unusual, but most remarkable, if he had not had several mistresses. Men of your age do have *affaires*, after all." Her lashes lowered briefly in delicate reference to the hushed-up scandal that had sent him to Ardsmuir.

"I could hope that his marriage would cause him to abandon any such irregular liaisons, but if it does not ..." She shrugged, her shoulders sloping in sudden tiredness. "I trust he will be discreet."

For the first time, it occurred to Grey to wonder whether either his

father or her first husband, Captain DeVane ... but this was not the time for such speculations.

"I think Mr. Trevelyan is highly discreet," he said, clearing his throat a little. "I only wondered if ... if Livy would be heartbroken, should ... anything happen." He liked his cousin, but knew very little about her; she had come to live with his mother after he himself had left to take up his first commission.

"She's sixteen," his mother said dryly. "Signor Dante and his Beatrice notwithstanding, most girls of sixteen are not capable of grand passion. They merely think they are."

"So--"

"So," she said, cutting him neatly off, "Olivia actually knows nothing whatever of her intended husband, beyond the fact that he is rich, well-dressed, not bad-looking, and highly attentive to herself. She knows nothing of his character, nor of the real nature of marriage, and if she is truly in love with anything at the moment, it is with her wedding dress."

Grey felt somewhat reassured at this. At the same time, he was well aware that the cancellation of his cousin's nuptials might easily cause a scandal that would dwarf the controversy over the dismissal of Pitt as Prime Minister two months before—and the brush of scandal was not discriminating; Olivia could be tarred with it, blameless or not, to the real ruin of her chances for a decent marriage.

"I see," he said. "If I were to discover anything further, then—"

"You should keep quiet about it," his mother said firmly. "Once they are married, if she should discover anything amiss regarding her new husband, she will ignore it."

"Some things are rather difficult to ignore, Mother," he said, with more of an edge than he intended. She glanced at him sharply, and the air seemed for an instant to solidify around him, as though there were suddenly nothing to breathe. Her eyes met his straight on and held them for a moment of silence. Then she looked away, setting aside her volume of Burke.

"If she finds she cannot ignore it," she said steadily, "she will be convinced that her life is ruined. Eventually, with luck, she will have a child, and discover that it is not. Shoo, Eustace." Pushing the somnolent spaniel aside with her foot, she rose, glancing at the small chiming clock on the table as she did so.

"Go and look for your German wine, John. The wretched sempstress is coming round at three, for what I sincerely hope is the

antepenultimate fitting for Livy's dress."

"Yes. Well ... yes." He stood awkwardly for a moment, then turned to take his leave, but halted suddenly at the door of the boudoir, turning as a question struck him.

"Mother?"

"Mm?" The Countess was picking up things at random, peering nearsightedly beneath a heap of embroidery. "Do you see my spectacles, John? I know I had them!"

"They're on your cap," he said, smiling despite himself. "Mother—how old were you when you married Captain DeVane?"

She clapped one hand to her head, as though to trap the errant spectacles before they could take flight. Her face was unguarded, taken by surprise by his question. He could see the waves of memory pass across it, tinged with pleasure and ruefulness. Her lips pursed a little, and then widened in a smile.

"Fifteen," she said. The faint dimple that showed only when she was most deeply amused glimmered in her cheek. "I had a wonderful dress!"



Chapter 12

Along Came a Spider

There was unfortunately not time to visit Fraser et Cie before his appointment with Quarry, whom he found waiting in front of the church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, as advertised.

"Are we attending a wedding or a funeral?" he asked, stepping down from the coach that had brought him.

"Must be a wedding—I see you've brought a present. Or is that for me?" Quarry nodded at the book beneath his arm.

"You may have it, if you like." Grey surrendered the presentation copy of *Fanny Hill* with some relief; he had been obliged to leave the house with it, as Olivia had come upon him as he passed through the hall and then had accompanied him to the door, flourishing further samples of lace beneath his nose while asking his opinion.

Quarry opened the book, blinked, then looked up at Grey, leering. "Why, Johnny. Didn't know you cared!"

"What?" Seeing Quarry's grin, he snatched the book back, discovering only then that there was an inscription on the title page. Evidently the Countess had been in ignorance of it, too—or at least he hoped so.

It was a fairly explicit verse from Catullus, inscribed to the Countess, and signed with the initial "J."

"Too bad my name's not Benedicta," Quarry remarked. "Looks quite an interesting volume!"

Gritting his teeth and hastily reviewing a mental list of his mother's acquaintance for persons beginning with "J," Grey carefully tore the title page from the book, stuffed it in his pocket, and handed the volume firmly back to Quarry.

"Who are we going to see?" he inquired. He had, as instructed, come in his oldest uniform, and picked critically at an unraveling thread at his cuff. Tom Byrd was an excellent barber, but his skill at valeting left something to be desired.

"Someone," Quarry said vaguely, looking at one of the illustrations. "Don't know his name. Richard put me onto him; said he knew all about the Calais business; might be helpful." Richard was Lord Joffrey, Quarry's elder half-brother, and a force in politics. While not directly involved with army or navy, he knew everyone of consequence who was, and generally was informed of any brewing scandals weeks before they erupted in public.

"Something in government, then, this person?" Grey asked, because they were turning into Whitehall Street, which contained little else.

Quarry closed the book and gave him a wary look.

"Don't know, exactly."

Grey gave up asking questions, but hoped that the business wouldn't take too long. He had had a frustrating day; the morning spent in futile inquiries, the afternoon in being fitted for a suit that he was increasingly sure would never be worn at the wedding for which it was intended. He was, all in all, in the mood for a hearty tea and a stiff drink—not interviews with nameless persons holding nonexistent positions.

He was a soldier, though, and knew duty when it called.

Whitehall Street was architecturally undistinguished, bar the remnants of the Palace and the great Banqueting Hall, left over from a previous century. Their destination was neither of these, nor yet any of the faintly moldy buildings in the neighborhood that housed the minor functions of government. To Grey's surprise, Quarry turned in instead at the door of the Golden Cross, a dilapidated tavern that stood across from St. Martin-in-the-Fields.

Quarry led the way to the snug, calling to the barman for a pair of pint-pots, and took a bench, behaving for all the world as though this were his local place of refreshment—and there were in fact a number of military persons among the clientele, though most of these were minor naval officers. Quarry kept up the pretense so far as to hold a loudly jocose conversation with Grey regarding horse-racing, though his gaze roamed ceaselessly round the room, taking note of everyone who entered or left.

After a few minutes of this pantomime, Quarry said very quietly, "Wait two minutes, then follow me." He gulped the rest of his drink,

shoved the empty glass carelessly away, and went out, going down the back passage as though in search of the privy.

Grey, rather bemused, drank the rest of his ale in a leisurely manner, then rose himself.

The sun was setting, but there was enough light to see that the cramped yard behind the Golden Cross was empty, bar the usual detritus of rubbish, wet ash, and broken barrels. The door to the privy hung ajar, showing that to be empty too—bar a cloud of flies, encouraged by the mild weather. Grey was waving off several of these inquisitive insects, when he saw a small movement in the shadows at the end of the yard.

Advancing cautiously, he discovered a personable young man, neatly but unobtrusively dressed, who smiled at him, but turned without greeting. He followed this escort, and found himself climbing a rickety stair that ran between the wall of the tavern and the neighboring building, ending at a door that presumably guarded the tavern owner's private quarters. The young man opened this and, going through, beckoned him to follow.

He was not sure what this preliminary mystification had led him to expect, but the reality was sadly lacking in excitement. The room was dark, low-raftered, and squalid, furnished with the well-used objects of a shabby life—a battered sideboard, a deal table with bench and stools, a chipped chamber pot, a smoky lamp, and a tray holding smudged glasses and a decanter full of murky wine. By way of incongruous decoration, a small silver vase sat on the table, holding a bunch of brilliant yellow tulips.

Harry Quarry sat just by the flowers, close in conversation with a small, fusty-looking man whose pudgy back was turned to Grey. Quarry glanced up and flicked an eyebrow, acknowledging Grey, but made a small motion with one hand, indicating that Grey was to stay back for a moment.

The discreet young man who had brought him in had disappeared through a door into the next room; another young man was busy at the far end of the room, sorting an array of papers and portfolios at the sideboard.

Something about this gentleman piqued his memory, and he took a step in that direction. The young man suddenly turned around, hands full of papers, looked up, and stood stock-still, gaping like a goldfish. A neat wig covered the golden curls, but Grey had no difficulty in recognizing the white face beneath it.

"Mr. Stapleton?" The pudgy little man at the table did not turn round, but lifted a hand. "Have you found it?"

"Yes, Mr. Bowles," the young man said, hot blue eyes still fixed on Grey's face. He swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. "Just coming."

Grey, having no idea whom this Mr. Bowles might be, nor what was going on, gave Stapleton a small, enigmatic smile. The young man tore his eyes away, and went to give the pudgy man the papers in his hand, but could not resist a quick, disbelieving glance over his shoulder.

"Thank you, Mr. Stapleton," the little man said, a clear tone of dismissal in his voice. Mr. Stapleton, alias Neil the Cunt, gave a short, jerky bow and moved away, eyes flickering to and from Grey with the air of one who has just seen an apparition but hopes it will have the good manners to disappear before the next glance.

Quarry and the shabby Mr. Bowles still murmured, heads together. Grey sauntered unobtrusively to an open window, where he stood, hands folded behind him, ostensibly seeking air as an antidote to the fug inside the room.

The sun was nearly down, the last of it gleaming off the rump of the bronze horse bearing the statue of Charles I that stood in the street below. He had always felt a sneaking fondness for that statue, having been informed by some forgotten tutor that the monarch, who had been two inches short of Grey's own current height, had had himself rendered on horseback in order to look more imposing—in the process, having his height unobtrusively amended to an even six feet.

A slight clearing of the throat behind him informed him that Neil the Cunt had joined him, as intended.

"Will you take some wine, sir?"

He half-turned, in such a way that it seemed natural for the young man, bearing his tray, to step forward and set it down on the broad sill. Grey made a small gesture of assent, looking coolly on as the wine was poured.

Stapleton's eyes flicked sideways to insure that no one was watching, then darted back to fix on Grey's with an expression of unspoken desperation.

Please. His lips moved soundlessly, as he held out the tumbler. The wine trembled, washing to and fro against the cloudy glass.

Grey didn't move to take it at once, but flicked his own glance sideways toward Mr. Bowles's bowed head, and back at Stapleton,

raising his brows in question.

A look of horror at the thought filled Stapleton's eyes, and he shook his head, very slightly.

Grey reached out and wrapped his hand around the glass, covering the tips of Neil's fingers as he did so. He squeezed them briefly, then took the glass, lowering his gaze.

"I thank you, sir," he said politely.

"Your servant, sir," Stapleton said, with equal politeness, and bowed before turning to lift the tray. Grey caught the faint scent of Stapleton's sweat, rank with fear, but the decanter and remaining glasses stayed steady as he carried them away.

From this angle of view, he could see the pillory that stood near Charles's statue. Grey barely tasted the foul wine, half-choked as he was by the beating of the pulse in his own throat. What in God's name was going on? He didn't think this meeting was to do with him; surely Harry would have warned him. But perhaps Stapleton had—no, or he would scarcely have been so terrorized at Grey's appearance. But then, what—

A scraping of chairs fortunately interrupted his speculations before they became any more incoherent.

"Lord John?" Quarry had stood up, addressing him formally. "May I present Mr. Hubert Bowles? Major Grey."

Mr. Bowles had stood up, too, though he scarcely appeared to have done so, he being so short that there was little change in height from his seated aspect. Grey bowed courteously, murmuring, "Your servant, sir."

He took the indicated stool, and found himself facing a pair of soft blue eyes, the vague slaty color of a newborn child's, set in a face bearing as much distinction of feature as a suet pudding. There was an odd scent in the air—something like very old sweat, but with a hint of putrid decay. He couldn't tell whether it came from the furnishings or from the man in front of him.

"My lord," Bowles said, in a lisping voice little more than a whisper. "It is kind of you to attend us."

As though I were here of choice, Grey thought cynically, but merely bowed and murmured a courtesy in reply, trying meanwhile to breathe exclusively through his mouth.

"Colonel Quarry has been recounting your efforts and discoveries," Bowles said, turning over a sheet of paper with short-fingered delicacy. "You have been most assiduous."

"You flatter me too much, sir," Grey said. "I have found out nothing certain—I take it we are discussing the death of Timothy O'Connell?"

"Among other things." Bowles smiled pleasantly, but the vague expression in his eyes did not alter.

Grey cleared his throat, belatedly tasting the nastiness of the wine he had swallowed. "I imagine that Colonel Quarry has informed you that I have discovered no proof of O'Connell's involvement in—the matter at hand?"

"He has." Bowles's gaze had drifted away from Grey, and rested idly on the yellow tulips. They had orange throats, Grey saw, and glowed like molten gold in the last of the light. If they had a scent, it wasn't strong enough to perceive, unfortunately. "Colonel Quarry thinks that your efforts might be aided were we to inform you of the results of our other ... inquiries."

"I see," Grey said, though he saw nothing at all, so far. "Our other inquiries." And who were "we," exactly? Harry sat hunched on his own stool, an untasted glass of wine in his hand, face carefully expressionless.

"As the Colonel told you, I believe, there were several suspects in the original theft." Bowles's small, soft paw spread itself on the papers. "Inquiries were instituted at once, through a variety of channels, regarding all of these men."

"I supposed that to be the case."

It was very warm in the chamber, despite the open window, and Grey could feel his shirt sticking to his back, sweat tickling his temples. He wanted to wipe his face on his sleeve, but somehow the presence of this odd little man constrained him to do no more than nod, sitting rigidly at attention.

"Without divulging details"—a tiny smile flitted across Bowles's face at that, as though the thought of withholding details was something secretly delicious—"I can inform you, Major, that it is now all but certain that Sergeant O'Connell was the guilty party."

"I see," Grey said again, guardedly.

"We lost track of him, of course, when the man who was following him—Jack Byrd, was that the name?—disappeared on Saturday." Grey was quite sure that Bowles knew the name; knew a lot more than that, in all likelihood.

"However," Bowles continued, extending a stubby finger to touch one of the shimmering petals, "we have recently received a report from another source, placing O'Connell at a particular location on the Friday. The day before his death."

A drop of sweat was hanging from Grey's chin; he could feel it trembling there like the grains of pollen trembling on the soft black anthers of the tulips.

"A rather unusual location," Bowles went on, stroking the petal with dreamy gentleness. "A place called Lavender House, near Lincoln's Inn. Have you heard of it?"

Oh. Christ. He heard the words distinctly, and hoped he hadn't spoken them aloud. This was it, then.

He sat up straighter still and wiped the drop of sweat from his chin with the back of his hand, setting himself for the worst.

"I have, yes. I visited Lavender House myself last week—in the course of my inquiries."

Bowles did not—of course!—look astonished by this. Grey was conscious of Quarry by his side, looking curious but not alarmed. He was reasonably sure that Harry had no idea of the nature of Lavender House. He was quite sure that Bowles did.

Bowles nodded amiably.

"Quite. What I am wondering, Major, is what you discovered regarding O'Connell that led you to that destination?"

"It—was not O'Connell about whom I was inquiring." Quarry shifted a little at that, and emitted a small "Hmph!"

No help for it. Commending his soul to God, Grey took a deep breath and recounted the entire story of his explorations into the life and behavior of Joseph Trevelyan.

"A green velvet dress," Bowles said, sounding only mildly curious. "God bless my soul." His hand had dropped from the tulips, and was now curled possessively around the fat little belly of the silver vase.

Grey's shirt was soaked through by now, but he was no longer anxious. He felt an odd sort of calm, in fact, as though matters had been taken quite out of his own control. What happened next lay in the hands of Fate, or God—or Hubert Bowles, whoever in God's name he was.

Stapleton was plainly in the employ of Mr. Bowles's office—whatever nameless office that might be—and Grey's second thought, after the shock of seeing him, had been that Stapleton had gone to Lavender House as an agent of Bowles.

But Stapleton had been terrified by Grey's sudden appearance; that meant that Stapleton thought Bowles to be in ignorance of his own nature. Why else that silent plea? That being so, Stapleton would never have mentioned Grey's presence at Lavender House; he could not do so without incriminating himself. And that in turn meant that his presence there had been purely personal. Given room to think for a moment, Grey realized—with the stomach-dropping relief of one stepping back from the trap of a scaffold—that Mr. Bowles was not in fact inquiring into his own behavior, save as it pertained to the O'Connell affair. And with an obvious reason for his presence at Lavender House given ...

"I b-beg your pardon, sir?" he stammered, realizing belatedly that Bowles had said something to him.

"I asked whether you were convinced that these Irish were conspicuously involved, Major? The Scanlons?"

"I think that they are," he replied cautiously. "But that is an impression only, sir. I have said to Colonel Quarry that it might be useful to question them more officially, though—and not only the Scanlons, but Miss Iphigenia Stokes and her family."

"Ah, Miss Stokes." The pendulous cheeks quivered faintly. "No, we are familiar with the Stokes family. Petty smugglers, to a man, but nothing whatever in the political line. Nor have they any connexion to the ... persons at Lavender House."

Persons. That, Grey realized, almost certainly meant Dickie Caswell. For Bowles to know about O'Connell's presence at Lavender House, someone there must have told him. The obvious conclusion was that Caswell was the "source" who had provided the information regarding O'Connell—which in turn implied that Caswell was a regular source of information for Mr. Bowles and his shadowy office. That was rather worrying, but there was no time to think of such things just now.

"You said that Mr. O'Connell visited Lavender House upon the Friday," Grey said, taking a fresh grip on the conversation. "Do you know whom he spoke with there?"

"No." Bowles's lips thinned to nothing. "He went to the back door of the establishment, and when asked his errand, replied that he was looking for a gentleman named Meyer, or something of the sort. The servant who saw him told him to wait and went away to inquire; when he returned, O'Connell had gone."

"Meyer?" Quarry leaned forward, interjecting himself into the conversation. "German? A Jew? I've heard of a fellow of that name—traveling coin-dealer. Think he works in France. Very good disguise for a secret agent, that—going about to big houses, carrying a pack, what?"

"There you have me, sir." Bowles seemed mildly annoyed by the admission. "There was no such person at Lavender House, nor was any such known by that name. It does seem most suspicious, though, given the circumstances."

"Oh, rather," Quarry said, with a tinge of sarcasm. "So, then. What d'you suggest we do?"

Bowles gave Quarry a cold look.

"It is of the utmost importance that we discover the man to whom O'Connell intended to sell his secrets, sir. It seems clear that this was a crime of impulse, rather than deliberate espionage—no one could have known that the requisitions would be exposed and unattended."

Quarry gave a grunt of agreement, and sat back, arms folded across his chest.

"Aye, so?"

"Having recognized the value of the information, though, and removed the documents, the thief—call him O'Connell, for convenience—would then be faced with the necessity of finding someone to pay for them."

Bowles pulled several sheets of rough foolscap from the stack before him, and spread them out. They were covered with a round scrawl, done in pencil, and sufficiently illegible that Grey could make out only the occasional word, read upside down.

"These are the reports that Jack Byrd supplied to us through Mr. Trevelyan," Bowles said, dealing the sheets upon the table one by one. "He describes O'Connell's movements, and notes the appearance—and often the name—of each person with whom he observed the Sergeant conversing. Agents of this office"—Grey noticed that he didn't specify which office—"have located and identified most of these persons. There were several among them who do indeed have tenuous connexions with foreign interests—but none who would themselves be able to accomplish a contract of such magnitude."

"O'Connell was looking for a purchaser," Grey summarized. "Perhaps one of these small fish gave him the name of this Meyer for whom he was searching?"

Bowles inclined his round little head an inch in Grey's direction.

"That was my assumption as well, Major," he said politely. " 'Small fish.' A very picturesque and appropriate image, if I may say so. And this Meyer may well be the shark in our sea of intrigue."

Grey caught a brief glimpse from the corner of his eye of Harry making faces, and coughed, turning a bit to lead Bowles's gaze in his own direction.

"Your ... um ... source, then—could he not discover any such person, if the suspect had an association with Lavender House?"

"I should certainly expect so," Bowles said, complacency returning. "My source disclaims all knowledge of such a person, though—which leads me to believe either that O'Connell was misdirected, or that this Meyer goes by an alias of some sort. Hardly an unlikely possibility, given the ... ah ... nature of that place."

"That place" was spoken with such an intonation—something between condemnation and ... fascination? gloating?—that Grey felt a brief crawling sensation, and rubbed instinctively at the back of his hand, as though brushing away some noxious insect.

Bowles was reaching into yet another folder, but the paper he withdrew this time was of somewhat higher quality; good parchment, and sealed with the Royal Seal.

"This, my lord, is a letter empowering you to make inquiries in the matter of Timothy O'Connell," Bowles said, handing it to Grey. "The language is purposely rather vague, but I trust you may employ it to good use."

"Thank you," Grey said, accepting the document with profound misgivings. He wasn't sure yet why, but his instincts warned him that the red seal indicated danger.

"Well, then, d'ye want Lord John to go back there and rummage the place?" Quarry asked, impatient. "We've a tame constable; shall we ask him to collect the Jews in his district and put their feet to the fire until they cough up this Meyer? What shall we *do*, for God's sake?"

Mr. Bowles disliked being hurried, Grey could see. His lips thinned again, but before he could reply, Grey made his own interjection.

"Sir—if I might? I have something—it may be nothing, of course—but there seems to be an odd connexion ..." He explained, as well as he could, the appearance of an unusual German wine at Lavender House and its apparent connexion with Trevelyan's mysterious companion. And Jack Byrd, of course, was connected to Trevelyan.

"So I am wondering, sir, whether it might be possible to trace buyers of this wine, and thus perhaps to fall upon the scent of the mysterious Mr. Meyer?"

The small bulge of flesh that served Mr. Bowles for a brow underwent convulsions like a snail thinking fierce thoughts—but then relaxed.

"Yes, I think that might be a profitable channel of inquiry," he

conceded. "In the meantime, Colonel"—he turned to Quarry with an air of command—"I recommend that you apprehend Mr. Scanlon and his wife, and make such representations to them as may be appropriate."

"Up to and including thumbscrews?" Harry inquired, standing up. "Or shall I stop at knouting?"

"I shall leave that to your impeccable professional judgment, Colonel," Bowles said politely. "I shall handle further investigations at Lavender House. And Major Grey—I think it best that you pursue the matter of Mr. Trevelyan's potential involvement in the matter; you seem best placed to handle it discreetly."

Meaning, Grey thought, that I now have "scapegoat" written on my forehead in illuminated capitals. If it all blows up, the blame can be safely pinned to my coat, and I can be shipped off to Scotland or Canada permanently, with no loss to society.

"Thank you," Grey said, handling the compliment as though it were a dead rat. Harry snorted, and they took their leave.

Before they had quite reached the door, though, Mr. Bowles spoke again.

"Lord John. If you will accept a bit of well-meant advice, sir?" Grey turned. The vague blue eyes seemed focused at a spot over his left shoulder, and he had to steel himself not to turn and look to see whether there was in fact someone behind him.

"Of course, Mr. Bowles."

"I think I should hesitate to allow Mr. Joseph Trevelyan to become a relation by marriage. Speaking only for myself, you understand."

"I thank you for your kind interest, sir," Grey said, and bowed, most correctly.

He followed Harry down the rickety stair and out of the noisome yard to the street, where they both stood for a moment, breathing deeply.

"Knouting?" Grey said.

"Russian flogging," Quarry explained, tugging at his wilted stock. "With a whip made of hippopotamus hide. Saw it once; flayed the poor bugger to the bone in three strokes."

"I see the appeal," Grey agreed, feeling an unexpected kinship with his half-brother Edgar. "You haven't got a spare knout you might lend me, before I go speak to Trevelyan?"

"No, but Maggie might have such a thing in her collection. Shall I ask?" Freed of Bowles's oppressive den, Quarry's natural exuberance

was reasserting itself.

Grey made a dissentient motion of the hand.

"Don't trouble." He fell in beside Harry and they turned down the street, back toward the river.

"If the recent Mr. Bowles were to be dried and stuffed, he would make an excellent addition to that collection. What *is* he, do you know?"

"Not fish nor fowl, so I suppose he must be flesh," Quarry said with a shrug. "Beyond that, I think it's best not to inquire."

Grey nodded understanding. He felt wrung out—and horribly thirsty.

"Stand you a drink at the Beefsteak, Harry?"

"Make it a cask," Quarry said, clapping him on the back, "and I'll stand supper. Let's go."



Chapter 13

Barber, Barber, Shave a Pig

The wineshop of Fraser et Cie was small and dark, but cleanly kept—and the air inside was dizzyingly rich with the perfume of grapes.

"Welcome, sir, welcome. Will you have the kindness to give me your honest opinion of this vintage?"

A small man in a tidy wig and coat had popped up out of the gloom, appearing at his elbow with the suddenness of a gnome springing out of the earth, offering a cup with a small quantity of dark wine.

"What?" Startled, Grey took the cup by reflex.

"A new vintage," the little man explained, bowing. "I think it very fine myself—very fine! But taste is such an individual matter, do you not find it so?"

"Ah ... yes. To be sure." Grey raised the cup cautiously to his face, only to have an aroma of amazing warmth and spice insinuate itself so deeply into his nostrils that he found the cup pressed to his lips in an involuntary effort to bring the elusive scent closer.

It spread over mouth and palate and rose up in a magic cloud inside his head, the flavor unfolding like a series of blooming flowers, each scented with a different heady perfume: vanilla, plum, apple, pear ... and the most delicate aftertaste, which he could describe only as the succulent feeling left on the tongue by the swallowing of fresh buttered toast.

"I will have a cask of it," he said, lowering the cup and opening his eyes as the last of the perfume evaporated on his palate. "What is it?"

"Oh, you like it!" The little man was all but clapping his hands with

delight. "I am so pleased. Now, if you find that particular vintage to your liking, I am *convinced* that you will enjoy this.... Not everyone does, it takes a particularly educated palate to appreciate the subtleties, but *you*, sir ..." The empty cup was snatched from his hand, and another substituted for it before he could draw breath to speak.

Wondering just how much he had already spent, he obligingly lifted the fresh cup.

Half an hour later, with flattened pocketbook and a pleasantly inflated head, he floated out of the shop, feeling rather like a soap bubble—light, airy, and gleaming with iridescent colors. Under his arm was a corked bottle of Schilcher, the mysterious German red, and in his pocket a list of those customers of Fraser et Cie known to have purchased it.

It was a short list, though there were more than he would have suspected—half a dozen names, including that of Richard Caswell, dealer in information. What else had Caswell carefully not told him? he wondered.

The enthusiastic wine-seller, who had eventually introduced himself as Mr. Congreve, was regretfully unable to tell him much regarding the other buyers of the German red: "Most of our customers merely send a servant, you know; such a pity that more will not come in person, like yourself, my lord!"

Still, it was apparent from the names that at least four of the six were in fact Germans, though none was called Meyer. If his mother could not identify them, chances were good that Captain von Namtzen could; wealthy foreigners in London tended to club together, or at least to be aware of each other, and if Prussia and Saxony found themselves on different sides of the present conflict, their inhabitants did at least still speak the same language.

A bundle of rags crouched by the pavement stirred as though to move toward him, and his eyes went to it at once, with a fixed stare that made the bundle hunch and mutter to itself. His mother had been accurate in describing the environs of Fraser et Cie as "not very nice," and the ice-blue suit with silver buttons, which had proven so helpful in establishing his immediate bona fides with Mr. Congreve, was attracting rather less-desirable attention from the less-reputable inhabitants of the neighborhood.

He had taken the precaution of wearing his sword as visible warning, and had a dagger in the waist of his breeches in addition to a jerkin of thickened leather beneath his waistcoat—though he knew well enough that a manner demonstrating instant willingness to do violence was better armor than any of these. He'd learned that at the age of eight; fine-boned and lightly built as he was, it had been a matter of self-preservation, and the lesson had served him well ever since.

He gave a hostile glare to two loungers eyeing him, and put a hand on his sword hilt; their eyes slid away. He would have welcomed Tom Byrd's company, but had reckoned that time was more important than safety. He had sent Byrd to the other wine-sellers his mother had recommended; perhaps he would turn up more names to investigate.

It was minor progress in his quest to untangle the affairs of Joseph Trevelyan, but at this point, any information that seemed straightforward and unambiguous was a relief. He had quite made up his mind that Trevelyan would not marry Olivia under any circumstance—but a means of discreetly severing the engagement while not harming Livy's reputation remained to be found.

Merely to announce the dissolution of the betrothal himself would not do; if no reason was given, rumor would spread like wildfire, and rumor was the ruin of a young woman. Lacking explanation, it would be assumed that Joseph Trevelyan had discovered some grievous fault in her, for engagements in this stratum of society were neither undertaken nor discarded lightly. Olivia's wedding contract had taken two months and four lawyers to draw up.

Likewise, he could not let the true cause of the severance be publicly known—and in terms of society, there was no privacy; if anyone outside the families concerned learned the truth, within days, everyone would know of it.

While the Greys were not without influence, they did not approach the wealth and power of the Cornish Trevelyans. Letting the truth be known was to invite enmity from the Trevelyans on a scale that would compromise his own family's affairs for decades—and would still damage Livy, for the Trevelyans would hold her responsible as the agent of Joseph's exposure and disgrace, no matter that she had known nothing of it.

He could force Joseph Trevelyan to break the engagement by privately threatening exposure; but that too would cast Livy's reputation in doubt, if no plausible explanation was given. No, Trevelyan must dissolve the engagement voluntarily, and must do so in a fashion that absolved Livy of any blame in the matter. There would still be talk and speculation, but with luck, it would not be so

injurious as to prevent Livy eventually making a reasonable match elsewhere.

What such grounds might be, and how he was to induce Trevelyan to discover them ... he had no good ideas, but was in hopes that finding Trevelyan's *inamorata* might provide one. Clearly, she was a married woman, and just as clearly, in a position of considerable social delicacy; if he could discover her identity, a visit to her husband might possibly suggest a means of bringing pressure to bear upon the Trevelyans without need of Grey appearing to act directly in the matter.

A growing racket jerked him from his thoughts, and he looked up to see a group of three youths coming toward him, joking and shoving each other in lighthearted disportment. They seemed so innocent as to arouse immediate suspicion, and glancing quickly round, he spotted the accomplice: a filthy girl of twelve or so, lurking nearby, ready to dash in and cut his buttons or snatch his wine, as soon as his attention should be distracted by her playfellows.

He took hold of his sword with one hand, and clutched the neck of the bottle club-like in the other, giving the girl a gimlet stare. She pouted impudently at him, but stepped back, and the gang of young pickpockets clattered past, talking loudly and patently ignoring him.

A sudden silence made him turn to look after them, though, and he saw the girl's petticoat tail just disappearing into an alleyway. The youths were nowhere in sight, but the sound of hasty footsteps thumped softly, running away down the dark alley.

He swore silently to himself, glancing round. Where might that alley come out again? The lane he was in showed several dark openings between his present location and the turn into the next street. Evidently, they meant to dash ahead, then lie in wait until he had passed their hiding place, jumping out to commit ambush from behind.

Forewarned was forearmed, but there were still three of them—four, counting the girl—and he doubted that the pie-sellers and ragand-bone men on the street would feel compelled to come to his aid. With quick decision, he turned upon his heel and ducked into the alley where the pickpockets had disappeared, lifting the bottom edge of his waistcoat to render the dagger hilt ready to his hand.

The lane had been shabby; the alley was noisome, narrow, dark, and half-choked with refuse. A rat, disturbed by the earlier passage of the pickpockets, hissed at him from a mound of rubble; he swung the

bottle and sent the rat flying into the wall, which it struck with a satisfyingly juicy thump before falling limp at his feet. He kicked it aside and went on, bottle at the ready and hand on his dagger, listening for any sound of footfalls ahead.

The alleyway forked, with a jog hard right, back toward the lane; he paused, listening, then risked a quick glance round the corner. Yes, there they were, crouched at the ready, sticks in hand. The girl, curse her, had a knife or a bit of broken glass in her hand; he saw the light glint from it as she moved.

A moment more, and they would realize he was not coming down the lane. He stepped silently past the fork and made his way as fast as he could through the rubble of the left-hand alley. He was obliged to climb over stacks of wet refuse and worm sideways through the hanging goods in a fuller's yard, to the gross disfigurement of his suit, but emerged at last into a wider thoroughfare.

He didn't recognize the street, but was able to see the dome of St. Paul's looming in the distance, and thus to judge his way. Breathing somewhat easier in spite of the mephitis of dog turds and rotten cabbage that surrounded him, he set his steps eastward, and turned his thoughts to the next item on the day's agenda of unpleasant duties, which was to resume the search for a break in the clouds obscuring the truth of Timothy O'Connell's life and death.

A note had come that morning from the enigmatic Mr. Bowles, to the effect that no further connexions had been discovered to exist between the late Sergeant and any known agents of a foreign power. Grey wondered grimly just how many unknown agents there might be in London.

Constable Magruder had come in person the night before, to report a lack of result from inquiries into the Turk's Head, scene of Saturday's brawl. The tavern's owner insisted stubbornly that O'Connell had left the place drunk, but moving under his own power—and while admitting that a brawl had occurred on the premises on the night in question, insisted that the only damage done had been to the window of the establishment, when one patron had thrust another through it, headfirst. No witnesses had been found who had seen O'Connell later in the evening—or who would admit to it.

Grey sighed, his mood of mellow buoyancy deflating. Bowles was convinced that O'Connell was the traitor—and possibly he was. But the longer the investigation continued, the more apparent it seemed to Grey that O'Connell's death had been a strictly personal matter.

And if that was the case, the suspects were obvious.

So was the next step—the arrest of Finbar Scanlon and his wife. Well, if it must be done, it must.

It would likely be a simple matter, given the circumstances. Apprehend them, and then question them separately. Quarry would make it clear to Scanlon that Francine would probably hang for O'Connell's murder, unless it could be proved that she had no involvement in the crime—and what proof was there, other than Scanlon's own confession of guilt?

Of course, success depended upon the assumption that if Scanlon loved the woman enough to kill for her, he would also die for her—and that might not be the case. It was, however, the best place to start; and if it did not work, why, then the same suggestion might be employed to better effect upon the wife, with respect to her new husband.

It was a sordid matter, and he took no pleasure in its resolution. It was necessary, though—and the process did hold one small gleam of hope. If O'Connell had indeed abstracted the requisitions, and had not passed the information on at the time of his death, then in all probability either Scanlon, Francine, or Iphigenia Stokes knew where it was, even if none of them had killed him for it.

If he or Quarry could extract anything resembling a confession from his suspects, they might be offered official clemency in the form of a commuted sentence—if the stolen records were restored. He was sure that between them, Harry Quarry and the mysterious Mr. Bowles could arrange for a sentence of transportation rather than hanging, and he hoped it would fall out so.

He was very much afraid, though, that the stolen requisitions were presently in France, having been taken there by Jack Byrd. And in that case ...

In spite of the convoluted nature of his thoughts, he had not abandoned his alertness, and the sound of running footsteps on the roadway behind him made him turn sharply, both hands on his weapons.

His pursuer was not one of the pickpockets, though, but rather his valet, Tom Byrd.

"Me lord," the boy gasped, coming to a halt beside him. He bent over, hands on his knees, panting like a dog to recover breath. "I was lookin' for—saw you—and ran—what—you been—a-doing to your suit?"

"Never mind that," Grey said shortly. "Has something happened?" Byrd nodded, gulping air. His face was still bright red and streaming sweat, but he could at least form words.

"Constable Magruder. He sent—says come as quick as may be. He's found a woman. A dead woman—in a green velvet dress."

Stray bodies would normally be taken to the nearest coroner—but mindful of the possible importance of his discovery and the need for discretion, Constable Magruder had helpfully had the body brought first to the regiment's quarters near Cadogan Square, where it had been placed in the hay shed—to the horror of Corporal Hicks, who was in charge of the horses. Harry Quarry, summoned from his tea to deal with this new circumstance, told Grey as much upon his arrival in the courtyard.

"What happened to your suit?" Quarry asked, casting an interested eye over the assorted stains. He rubbed a finger beneath his nose. "Phew."

"Never mind that," Grey said tersely. "Do you know the woman?"

"Don't think her own mother would know her," Quarry said, turning to lead the way into the stables. "Pretty sure I've seen the dress, at Maggie's place. Certainly isn't Maggie, though—no tits at all."

A sudden fear turned Grey's bowels to water. Christ, could it be Nessie?

"When you say her mother wouldn't know her—had she ... been in the water long?"

Quarry cast him a puzzled look.

"She wasn't in the water at all. Had her face beaten in."

He felt bile rise at the back of his throat. Had the little whore gone nosing about, in hopes of helping him further, and been murdered for her interference? If she had died on his account, and in such a way ... Uncorking the bottle of wine, he took a deep swallow, and another, then handed it to Quarry.

"Good idea. She's niffy as a Frenchman's arse; been dead a day or two." Harry tilted up the bottle and drank, looking somewhat happier afterward. "Nice stuff, that."

Grey saw Tom Byrd cast a look of longing at the bottle, but Quarry kept firm hold of it as he led the way through the brick-paved stables.

Magruder was waiting for them outside the shed, with one of his constables.

"My lord." Magruder inclined his head, looking curiously at Grey. "What happened to—"

"Where did you find her?" Grey interrupted.

"In Saint James's Park," the constable replied. "In the bushes by the path."

"Where?" Grey said incredulously. Saint James's was the preserve of merchants and aristocrats, where the young, the rich, and the fashionable strolled to see and be seen. Magruder shrugged, slightly defensive.

"People out for an early walk found her—or rather, their dog did." He stepped back, ushering the soldiers ahead of him through the door to the tack room. "There was considerable blood."

Grey's first thought upon seeing the body was that the constable was a master of understatement. His second was a sense of profound relief; the body was in fact fairly flat-chested, but was much too tall to be Nessie. The hair was darker than the Scottish whore's, too—nearly black—and while it was thick and wavy, it was nothing like Nessie's wild curly mane.

The face was essentially gone; obliterated in a frenzy of blows from something like the back of a spade or a fireplace poker. Suppressing his distaste—Quarry had been right about the smell—Grey circled slowly about the table on which the corpse had been laid.

"Think it's the same?" Quarry asked, watching him. "The dress, I mean. You've an eye for such things."

"I am fairly sure that it is. The lace ..." He nodded at the wide trim on the gown, which matched the edging of the kerchief. The kerchief itself straggled loose across the table, torn and soaked in blood, but still pinned precariously to the gown. "It's Valenciennes. I noticed it particularly at the brothel, because it's very like that on my cousin's wedding gown—there are swathes of it all over my mother's house. Expensive stuff, though."

"Not common, then." Quarry fingered the tattered rag of the kerchief.

"Not at all."

Quarry nodded, turning to Magruder.

"I think we shall be wanting a word with a madam named Maggie—house in Meacham Street, you know it? Rather a pity, that," he added, turning back to Grey with a sigh. "Did like that blonde with

the big tits."

Grey nodded, only half-hearing. The gown itself was so crusted with blood and dirt that the color was almost indistinguishable; only the draggled folds of the skirt still showed emerald green. The smell was very strong in the confined quarters—Quarry had been right, she did reek like a ...

He bent closer, hands on the table, sniffing deeply. Civet. He'd swear he smelt civet—and something else as well. The corpse was wearing perfume, though the scent was nearly obscured by the earthier reeks of blood and ordure.

She wears a very expensive scent. Civet, vetiver, and orange, if I am not mistaken. He could hear Richard Caswell's voice in his head, dry as grave flowers. She has dark hair. Nearly black. Your cousin is fair, I believe?"

Excitement and dread tightened his belly as he leaned over the dead woman. It had to be; this was Trevelyan's mysterious lover. But what had happened to her? Had her husband—if she had one—discovered the affair and taken his revenge? Or had Trevelyan ...

He sniffed again, eager for confirmation.

Where did women wear perfume? Behind the ears—no, not a chance; the corpse had only one ear and the other was in no condition ... Between the breasts, perhaps; he'd seen his mother tuck a scented cloth down into the top of her stays before a party.

He ducked his head to inhale more deeply, and saw the small, blackened hole in the center of the bodice, inconspicuous amidst the general carnage.

"I will be damned," he said, looking up at the phalanx of bemused faces hovering over him. "She's been shot."

"Do you want to know summat else, me lord?" The whisper came at his elbow. Tom Byrd, by now somewhat inured to nasty sights, had edged his way close, and was looking at the corpse's smashed face in fascination.

"What's that, Tom?"

The boy's finger floated tentatively across the table, pointing at what Grey had taken for a smudge of dirt behind the jaw.

"She's got whiskers."

The corpse was, in fact, that of a man. Striking as that was, though, it

was not the main point of remark, once the rags of the green gown had been removed to verify the fact.

"I've never seen anything like that in me life," Harry Quarry said, eyeing the dead man with a combination of disgust and fascination. "You, Magruder?"

"Well, on a woman, now and then," the constable said, pursing his lips fastidiously. "Some of the whores do it regular, I understand. Bit of a curiosity, like."

"Oh, whores, yes, of course." Quarry flapped a hand, indicating that such usage was not only familiar to him, but positively commonplace. "But this is a man, dammit! You've never seen such a thing, have you, Grey?"

Grey had, in fact, seen such a thing, and more than once, though it was not an affectation that appealed to him personally. It would scarcely do to say so, though, and he shook his head, widening his eyes in a semblance of shocked incomprehension at the perversity of mankind.

"Mr. Byrd," he said, making space for Tom to approach closer. "You are our chief expert on the art of shaving; what can you tell us about this?"

Nostrils pinched against the reek of the corpse, Tom the barber's son motioned for the lantern to be brought closer, and leaned down, squinting in professional fashion along the planes of the body.

"Well," he said judiciously, "he does it—did it, I mean—regular. More like, someone did it for him—a nice, professional bit of work. See, there's no cuts, nor yet no scraping—and that's an awkward bit, round there." He pointed, frowning. "Hard to manage by yourself, I should think."

Quarry made a noise that might have been a laugh, but converted it hastily into a wheezing cough.

Byrd, ignoring this, stretched out a hand and ran it very delicately up the corpse's leg.

"Oh, yes," he said, in tones of satisfaction. "Feel that, me lord? You can feel the stubble, sharp-ended, like, when you goes against the grain. It gets like that when a man shaves regular. If he shaves no more than once or twice a month, he's like to get bumps—the hair curls up under the skin as it grows, see? But no bumps here."

There were not. The corpse's skin was smooth, devoid of hairs on arms, legs, chest, buttocks and privates. Other than smears of dried blood and caked ordure, and the small black hole of the bullet wound in his chest, only the deep purple-brown of the nipples and the riper tones of the rather well-endowed expanse between the man's legs interrupted the pale olive perfection of his flesh. Grey thought the gentleman would likely have been quite popular, in certain circles.

"He has stubble. So the shaving took place before death?" Grey asked.

"Oh, yes, me lord. Like I said—he does it regular."

Quarry scratched his head.

"I will be damned. D'ye think he's a he-whore, then? A sodomite of some type?"

Grey would have taken a substantial wager to that effect, were it not for one observation. The man was slight, but well-built and muscular, like Grey himself. However, the muscles of chest and arms had begun to sag from lack of use, and there was a definite roll of fat around the middle. Adding to these observations the fact that the man's neck was deeply seamed and, despite an impeccable manicure, the backs of his hands thickly veined and knobbed, Grey was reasonably sure that the body was that of a man in his late thirties or early forties. Male prostitutes seldom lasted far beyond twenty.

"Nah, too old," Magruder objected, fortunately saving Grey from the necessity of finding some way of saying the same thing, without disclosing how he knew it. "This cove would be one as hires such, not one himself."

Quarry shook his head in disapproval.

"Should never have suspected Maggie of dealing in that sort of thing," he said, as much in regret as condemnation. "You sure about the dress, then, Grey?"

"Reasonably. It is not impossible that a dressmaker should make more than one gown, of course—but whoever made this one made the one that Magda was wearing."

"Magda?" Quarry blinked at him.

Grey cleared his throat, a hideous realization coming suddenly over him. Quarry hadn't known.

"The ... ah ... Scottish woman I met there informed me that the madam was called Magda, and is in fact a, um, a German of some type."

Quarry's face looked pinched in the lantern light.

"Of some type," he repeated bleakly. It made considerable difference *which* type, and Quarry was well aware of it. Prussia and Hanover—of course—had allied themselves with England, while the

duchy of Saxony had chosen up sides with France and Russia, in support of its neighbor Austria. For an English colonel to be patronizing a brothel owned by a German of unknown background and allegiance, and now with an evident involvement in criminal matters, was a dicey proposition, and one that Quarry must devoutly hope would never come to official notice. Or the notice of the unblinking Mr. Bowles.

It wouldn't do Grey's reputation any good, either. He realized now that he ought to have mentioned the situation to Quarry at the time, rather than assuming that he must know of Magda's background already. But he had allowed himself to be distracted by alcoholic excess, and by Nessie's disclosure about Trevelyan—and now he could but hope there wasn't the devil to pay for it.

Harry Quarry drew a deep breath and blew it out again, squaring his shoulders. One of Harry's many good points was that he never wasted time in recrimination, and—unlike Bernard Sydell—never blamed subordinates, even when they deserved it.

"Well, then," he said, and turned to Magruder. "I think we must have Mrs. Magda taken into custody and questioned without delay. We shall need to search her premises, as well, I should think—will you require a warrant?"

"Yes, sir. Given the circumstances"—Magruder nodded delicately at the dead man—"I shouldn't think the magistrate would be reluctant."

Quarry nodded, straightening the coat on his shoulders.

"Aye. I'll come myself and speak to him now." He drummed his fingers restlessly on the table, making the corpse's slack hand tremble with the vibration. "Grey—I think we shall have the Scanlons taken up, too, as you advised. You'll question them; go round to the gaol tomorrow, once Magruder has had a chance to lay them by the heels. As for ... the Cornish gentleman ... use your best judgment there, will you?"

Grey managed a nod, cursing himself for his idiocy, and then Quarry and Magruder were gone, leaving the faceless corpse naked and staring in the flickering light.

"You in trouble, me lord?" Tom Byrd was frowning worriedly at him from the shadows, having evidently divined some hint of the undercurrents in the preceding conversation.

"I hope not." He stood looking down at the dead man. Who the devil was he? Grey had been convinced that the body was that of Trevelyan's lover—and it might still be, he reminded himself. True,

Caswell had insisted that it was a woman whom Trevelyan entertained at Lavender House, but Caswell might have been mistaken in his own powers of olfactory discernment—or lying, for reasons unknown.

Use his best judgment, Harry said. His best judgment was that Trevelyan was in this up to his neck—but there was no direct evidence.

There was certainly no evidence to connect the Scanlons with this business, and precious little to connect them with O'Connell's murder—but Harry's motive in ordering an arrest there was apparent; if inquiries were eventually made into the conduct of the investigation, it would be prudent to make it look as though affairs were being pursued aggressively. The muddier the waters, the less likely anyone might be to take up the matter of Magda's inconvenient nationality.

"Major?" He turned, to see Corporal Hicks frowning at him from the doorway. "You aren't going to leave that thing *here*, are you?"

"Oh. No, Corporal. You may remove it to the coroner's. Fetch some men."

"Right, sir." Hicks disappeared with alacrity, but Grey hesitated. Was there any further information that the body itself could offer?

"You think it was the same cove what did for that Sergeant O'Connell what did for this 'un, me lord?" Tom Byrd had come to stand alongside him.

"I have no particular reason to think so," Grey said, a little startled at this supposition. "Why?"

"Well, the, uh, face." Tom gestured, a little awkwardly, at the remains, and swallowed audibly. One eyeball had been dislodged so far from its parent socket as to dangle out onto the crushed cheek, staring accusingly off into the shadows of the hay shed. "Seems like whoever did this didn't care for him much—same as whoever stamped on the Sergeant."

Grey considered that, pursing his lips. Reluctantly, he shook his head.

"I don't think so, Tom. I think that whoever did this"—he gestured at the corpse—"did it in order to disguise the gentleman's identity, not out of personal dislike. It's heavy work, to crush a skull like that, and this was a very thorough job. One would have to be in an absolute frenzy of hatred—and if that was the case, why shoot him first?"

"Did they? Shoot him first, I mean, me lord. 'Coz what you said

about dead men don't bleed—this one surely did, so he can't have been dead when they ... erm." He glanced at the smashed face, and then away. "But he couldn't live long like that—so why shoot him, then?"

Grey stared at Tom. The boy was pale, but bright-eyed, intent on his argument.

"You have a very logical sort of mind, Tom," he said. "Why, indeed?" He stood for a moment looking down at the corpse, trying to reconcile the disparate bits of information at hand. What Tom said made obvious sense—and yet he was convinced that whoever had killed this man had not beaten in his face from anger. Just as he was convinced that whoever had stamped on Tim O'Connell's face had acted from precisely that emotion.

Tom Byrd stood patiently by, keeping quiet as Grey circled the table, viewing the corpse from all angles. Nothing seemed to make sense of the puzzle, though, and when Hicks's men came in, he allowed them to bundle up the body into a canvas.

"D'you want us to take this, as well, sir?" One of the men picked up the sodden hem of the green dress, gingerly, between two fingers.

"Not even the mort-man'd want *that*," the other objected, wrinkling his nose at the reek.

"You couldn't sell it to a ragpicker, even was you to wash it."

"No," Grey said, "leave it, for now."

"You don't mean to leave it in here, do you, sir?" Hicks stood by, arms folded, glowering at the sodden pile of velvet.

"No, I suppose not," Grey said, with a sigh. "Don't want to put the horses off their feed, do we?"

It was full dark as they left the stables, but with a gibbous moon rising. No coach would take them as passengers with their malodorous burden, even with it wrapped in tarred canvas, and so they were obliged to walk to Jermyn Street.

They made the journey for the most part in silence, Grey mulling over the events of the day, trying vainly to fit the dead man somehow into the puzzle. Two things alone seemed clear about the matter: one, that a great effort had been made to disguise the man's identity. Two, that there was some connexion between the dead man and the brothel in Meacham Street—which in turn meant that there must be some connexion with Joseph Trevelyan.

This seemed vaguely wrong; if one's chief motive was to disguise identity, why clothe the corpse in such a distinctive gown? His mind

supplied the answer, belatedly reminding him of what he had seen but not consciously noted at the time. The man had not been dressed in the gown after death—he had been wearing it when he was shot.

There was no doubt about it. The bullet hole in the dress was singed round the edges, and there were powder grains in the fabric of the dress for some distance around it; likewise, the wound in the chest had shreds of fabric driven into it.

That began to make matters seem more sensible. If the victim had been wearing the gown when shot, and there was some reason not to remove it—then the smashing of the man's face to obscure identity was a reasonable step.

Look at it from the other direction, he thought. If Magruder had not been on the alert for any mention of a green velvet gown—for no one could have known that there was any official interest in such a thing —what might have been expected to happen?

The corpse would have been discovered, and taken to the nearest morgue—which was ... where, exactly? Near Vauxhall, perhaps?

That was promising; Vauxhall was a rowdy district, full of theaters and amusement parks, much patronized by ladies of the evening *and* by painted mollies out for an evening's jollification at one of the many masked balls. He must ask Magruder to discover whether there had been a ball on Tuesday night.

So, then. If not for Magruder's interference, the body would have been taken to a morgue, where it would likely have been assumed to be that of a prostitute, such women not uncommonly meeting with violent ends. Everyone who had seen the body had in fact assumed it to be that of a woman, until Tom the barber's son had spotted the tiny patch of telltale stubble.

That was it, he thought, with a small spurt of excitement. That was why the gown was not removed and why the face was smashed; to disguise not the identity per se, but the sex of the victim!

He felt Tom glance at him in curiosity, and realized that he must have made some exclamation. He shook his head at the boy and paced on, too engrossed in his speculations to suffer the distraction of conversation.

Even if the truth of the corpse's sex had been discovered, he thought, it would likely have been assumed that the body belonged to the shady half-world of transvestite commerce—no one of consequence, no one who would be missed.

The body would then have been promptly disposed of, taken off to

a dissection room or a potter's field, depending on its state—but in either case, safely gone, with no chance of its ever being identified.

All of which gave him an unpleasant sensation in the pit of the stomach. A number of boys and young men from that shadow world disappeared in London every year, their fates—when they were noticed at all—usually concealed in official wording that sought to soothe society's sensibilities by ignoring any hint that they had been involved in abominable perversion.

Which meant that for such trouble to be taken in disguising this particular death—the dead man was someone of consequence. Someone who would be missed. The bundle under his arm seemed suddenly heavier, dragging at him like the weight of a severed head.

"Me lord?" Tom Byrd laid a tentative hand on the bundle, offering to take it from him.

"No, Tom, that's all right." He shifted the bundle, tucking it more firmly under his arm. "I smell like a slaughterhouse already; no need for you to spoil your clothes as well."

The boy took his hand away, with an alacrity that informed Grey of the nobility of the original offer. The bundle *did* stink abominably. He smiled to himself, face hidden in the darkness.

"I'm afraid we will have missed our supper—but I suppose Cook will let us have something."

"Yes, me lord."

Piccadilly lay just ahead; the streets were opening out, lined with the shops of clothiers and merchants, rather than the libkens and taverns of the narrower ways near Queen Street. At this time of night, the streets were busy with foot traffic, horses and carriages; random snatches of conversation, shouts and cheerful bustle drifted past.

A light rain was falling, and mist rose from the pavements round their feet. The lightermen had come already; the streetlamps flickered and glowed under the glass of their canopies and shone upon the wet stones, helping to dispel the lurking horror of that conference in the hay shed.

"Do you get used to it, me lord?" Tom glanced at him, round face troubled in the transient glow.

"To what? Death, do you mean, and bodies?"

"Well ... that sort of death, I suppose." The boy made a diffident gesture toward the bundle. "I'd think this was maybe different than what you see in battle—but maybe I'm wrong?"

"Maybe." Grey slowed his pace to let a group of gay blades pass,

laughing as they crossed the street, dodging an oncoming detachment of mounted Horse Guards, harness glittering in the wet.

"I suppose it is no different in the essentials," he said, stepping out as the sound of hooves clattered off down Piccadilly. "I have seen more dreadful things on a battlefield, often. And yes, you do get used to that—you must."

"But it is different?" Tom persisted. "This?"

Grey took a deep breath, and a firmer hold on his burden.

"Yes," he said. "And I should not like to meet the man to whom this is routine."



Chapter 14

A Troth Is Blighted

Grey was rudely roused from his bed just after dawn, to find Corporal Jowett arrived on the doorstep with bad news.

"Ruddy birds had flown, sir," Jowett said, handing over a note from Malcolm Stubbs to the same effect. "Lieutenant Stubbs and I went round with a couple of soldiers, along with that Magruder fellow and two constables, thinking to take the Scanlons unawares whilst it was still dark." Jowett looked like an emaciated bulldog at the best of times; his face now was positively savage. "Found the door locked and broke it in—only to find the place empty as a ruddy tomb on Easter morning."

Not only had the Scanlons themselves decamped; the entire stock of the apothecary's shop was missing, leaving behind only empty bottles and bits of scattered rubbish.

"They had warning, eh?" Jowett said. "Somebody tipped 'em—but who?"

"I don't know," Grey said grimly, tying the sash of his banyan. "You spoke to the neighbors?"

Jowett snorted.

"For what good it did. Irishmen, all of 'em, and liars born. Magruder arrested a couple of them, but it won't do any good—you could see that."

"Did they say at least when the Scanlons had decamped?"

"Most of them said they hadn't the faintest—but we found one old granny down the end of the street as said she'd seen folk carrying boxes out of the house on the Tuesday."

"Right. I'll speak to Magruder later." Grey glanced out the window;

it was raining, and the street outside was a dismal gray, but he could see the houses on the other side—the sun was up. "Will you have some breakfast, Jowett? A cup of tea, at least."

Jowett's bloodshot eyes brightened slightly.

"I wouldn't say no, Major," he allowed. "It's been a busy night."

Grey sent the Corporal off to the kitchen in the charge of a yawning servant, and stood staring out the window at the downpour outside, wondering what the devil to make of this.

On the positive side, this hasty disappearance clearly incriminated the Scanlons—but in what? They had a motive for O'Connell's death, and yet they had simply denied any involvement, Scanlon looking cool as a plateful of sliced cucumbers. Nothing had happened since that might alarm them in that regard; why should they flee now?

What *had* happened was the discovery of the dead man in the green velvet dress—but what could the Scanlons have had to do with that?

Still, it seemed very likely that the man had been killed sometime on Tuesday—and Tuesday appeared to be when the Scanlons had fled. Grey rubbed a hand through his hair, trying to stimulate his mental processes. All right. That was simply too great a coincidence to *be* a coincidence, he thought. Which meant ... what?

That the Scanlons—or Finbar Scanlon, at least—were involved in some way with the death of the man in green velvet. And who the hell was he? A gentleman—or someone with similar pretensions, he thought. The corpse was no workingman, that was sure.

"Me lord?" Tom Byrd had come in with a tray. He hadn't yet washed his face, and his hair stuck up on end, but he seemed wideawake. "I heard you get up. D'ye want some tea?"

"Christ, yes." He seized the steaming cup and inhaled its fragrant steam, the heat of the china wonderful in his chilled hands.

The rain poured in sheets from the eaves. When had they left? he wondered. Were Scanlon and his wife out in this, or were they safe in some place of refuge? Chances were, they had decamped immediately following the death of the man in green velvet—and yet, they had taken the time to pack, to remove the valuable stock from the shop.... These were not the panicked actions of murderers, surely?

Of course, he was obliged to admit to himself, he hadn't dealt with many murderers before—unless ... The recollection flashed through his mind, as it did now and then, of what Harry Quarry had told him about Jamie Fraser and the death of a Sergeant Murchison at Ardsmuir. If it was true—and even Quarry had not been sure—then

Fraser also had remained cool and unpanicked, and had gotten away with the crime in consequence. What if Scanlon had a similar temperament, an equal capacity?

He shook his head impatiently, dismissing the thought. Fraser was not a murderer, whatever else he might be. And Scanlon? For the life of him, Grey could not decide.

"Which is why we have courts of law, I suppose," he said aloud, and drained the rest of the cup.

"Me lord?" Tom Byrd, who had just succeeded in lighting the fire, scrambled to his feet and picked up the tray.

"I was merely observing that our legal system rests on evidence, rather than emotion," Grey said, setting the empty cup back on the tray. "Which means, I think, that I must go and find some." Brave words, considering that he had no good ideas as to where to look for it.

"Oh, aye, sir? Will you be wanting your good uniform, then?"

"No, I think not yet." Grey scratched thoughtfully at his jaw. The only hope of a clue that he had at present was the German wine. Thanks to the helpful Mr. Congreve, he knew what it was, and who had bought it. If he could not find the Scanlons, perhaps he could discover something about the mysterious man in green.

"I'll wear it when we call upon Captain von Namtzen. But first—" But first it was high time to discharge an unpleasant duty.

"I'll wear the ice-blue now, if it's decent," he decided. "But first, I need a shave."

"Very good, me lord," said Byrd, in his best valet's voice, and bowed, upsetting the teacup.

Tom Byrd had mostly succeeded in removing the odor from the iceblue suit. Mostly.

Grey sniffed discreetly at the shoulder of his coat. No, that was all right; perhaps it was just a miasma from the object in his pocket. He had cut a square from the green velvet dress, crusty with dried blood, and brought it with him, wrapped in a bit of oilcloth.

He had, after some hesitation, also brought a walking stick, a slender affair of ebony, with a chased silver handle in the shape of a brooding heron. He did not intend to strike Trevelyan with it, no matter how the interview progressed. He was, however, aware that having some object with which to occupy one's hands was useful in times of social difficulty—and this occasion promised to be rather more difficult than the usual.

He'd thought of his sword, merely because that was an accustomed tool, and the weight of it at his side a comfort. This wasn't an occasion for uniform, though.

Not that he wasn't an oddity among the crush of seamen, porters, barrowmen, and oysterwomen near the docks, but there were at least a few gentlemen here as well. A pair of prosperous-looking merchants strolled together toward him, one holding a chart, which he seemed to be explaining to the other. A man whom he recognized as a banker picked his way through the mud and slime underfoot, careful of his coat as he brushed past a barrow full of slick black mussels, dripping weed and water.

He was aware of people looking at him in curiosity as he passed, but that was all right; it wasn't the sort of curiosity that would cause talk.

He had gone first to Trevelyan's house, only to be informed that the master had gone down to his warehouse and was not expected before the evening. Would he leave his card?

He had declined, and taken a carriage to the docks, unable to bear the thought of waiting all day to do what must be done.

And what was he going to do? He felt hollow at the thought of the coming interview, but clung firmly to the one thing he did know. The engagement must be broken, officially. Beyond that, he would get what information he could from Trevelyan, but to protect Olivia was the most important thing—and the only thing that he, personally, could insure.

He wasn't looking forward to going home afterward and telling Olivia and his mother what he had done—let alone why. He'd learned in the army not to anticipate more than one unpleasant contingency at a time, though, and resolutely ignored the thought of anything that lay beyond the next half hour. Do what must be done, and then deal with the consequences.

It was one of the larger warehouses in the district, and despite the shabby look of such buildings in general, well-maintained. Inside, it was a vast cavern of riches; despite his errand, Grey took time to be impressed. There were stacked chests and wooden boxes, stenciled with cryptic symbols of ownership and destination; bundles wrapped in canvas and oilcloth; sheets of rolled copper; and stacks of boards,

barrels, and hogsheads tiered five and six high against the walls.

Beyond the sheer abundance, he was as much impressed by the sense of orderliness amid confusion. Men came and went, burdened like ants, fetching and taking away in a constant stream. The floor was inches deep in the fragrant straw used for packing, and the air filled with golden motes of it, kicked up by the treading feet.

Grey brushed bits of straw from his coat, taking deep breaths with pleasure; the air was perfumed with the intoxicating scents of tea, wine, and spice, gently larded with the more oleaginous tones of whale oil and candle wax, with a solid bottom note of honest tar. On a different occasion, Grey would have liked to poke about in the fascinating clutter, but not today, alas. With a last regretful lungful, he turned aside in pursuit of his duty.

He made his way through the bustle to a small enclosure of clerks, all seated on high stools and madly scribbling. Boys roamed among them like dairymaids through a herd of cows, milking them of their output and carrying off stacks of papers toward a door in the wall, where the foot of a staircase hinted at the presence of offices above.

His heart gave an unpleasant thump as he spotted Trevelyan himself, deep in conversation with an ink-stained functionary. Taking a deep breath of the scented air, he threaded his way through the maze of stools, and tapped Trevelyan on the shoulder. Trevelyan swung round at once, clearly accustomed to interruption, but halted, surprised, at sight of Grey.

"Why, John!" he said, and smiled. "Whatever brings you here?"

Slightly taken aback by the use of his Christian name, Grey bowed formally.

"A private matter, sir. Might we—?" He raised his brows at the ranks of laboring clerks, and nodded toward the stair.

"Of course." Looking mildly puzzled, Trevelyan waved away a hovering assistant, and led the way up the stair and into his own office.

It was a surprisingly plain room; large, but simply furnished, the only ornaments an ivory-and-crystal inkwell and a small bronze statue of some many-armed Indian deity. Grey had expected something much more ornate, in keeping with Trevelyan's wealth. On the other hand, he supposed that perhaps that was one reason why Trevelyan was wealthy.

Trevelyan waved him toward a chair, going to take his own seat behind the large, battered desk. Grey stood stiffly, though, the blood thumping softly in his ears.

"No, sir, I thank you. The matter will not take long."

Trevelyan glanced at him in surprise. The Cornishman's eyes narrowed, seeming for the first time to take in Grey's stiffness.

"Is something the matter, Lord John?"

"I have come to inform you that your engagement to my cousin is at an end," Grey said bluntly.

Trevelyan blinked, expressionless.

What would he do? Grey wondered. Say "Oh," and leave it at that? Demand an explanation? Become furious and call him out? Summon servants to remove him from the premises?

"Do sit down, John," Trevelyan said at last, sounding quite as cordial as he had before. He took his own chair and leaned back a little, gesturing in invitation.

Seeing no alternative, Grey sat, resting the walking stick across his knees.

Trevelyan was stroking his long, narrow chin, looking at Grey as though he were a particularly interesting shipment of Chinese pottery.

"I am of course somewhat surprised," he said politely. "Have you spoken to Hal about this?"

"In my brother's absence, I am the head of the family," Grey said firmly. "And I have decided that under the circumstances, your betrothal to my cousin ought not to be continued."

"Really?" Trevelyan went on looking polite, though he raised one eyebrow dubiously. "I do wonder what your brother is likely to say, upon his return. Tell me, is he not expected back fairly soon?"

Grey set the tip of his walking stick on the floor and leaned upon it, gripping hard. *The devil with a sword,* he thought, keeping a similar grip upon his temper. *I should have brought a knout.*

"Mr. Trevelyan," he said, steel in his voice, "I have told you my decision. It is final. You will cease at once to pay addresses to Miss Pearsall. The wedding will not take place. Do I make myself clear?"

"No, I can't say that you do, really." Trevelyan steepled his fingers and placed them precisely below the tip of his nose, so that he looked at Grey over them. He was wearing a cabochon seal ring with the incised figure of a Cornish chough, and the green stone glowed as he leaned back. "Has something occurred that causes you to take this—I hope you will excuse my characterizing it as rather rash—step?"

Grey stared at him for a moment, considering. At last, he reached into his pocket and removed the oilcloth parcel. He laid it on the desk

in front of Trevelyan, and flipped it open, releasing a crude stink of corruption that overwhelmed any hint of spice or straw.

Trevelyan stared down at the scrap of green velvet, still expressionless. His nostrils twitched slightly, and he took a deep breath, seeming to inhale something.

"Excuse me a moment, will you, John?" he said, rising. "I'll just see that we are not disturbed." He vanished onto the landing, allowing the door to close behind him.

Grey's heart was still beating fast, but he had himself in better hand, now that it was begun. Trevelyan had recognized the scrap of velvet; there was no doubt of that.

This came as a considerable relief, on the one hand; there would be no need to address the matter of Trevelyan's disease. It was grounds for great wariness, though; he needed to extract as much information from the Cornishman as he could. How? No way of knowing what would be effective; he must just trust to the inspiration of the moment—and if the man proved obdurate, perhaps a mention of the Scanlons would be beneficial.

It was no more than a few minutes, but seemed an age before Trevelyan returned, carrying with him a jug and a pair of wooden cups.

"Have a drink, John," he said, setting them on the desk. "Let us speak as friends."

Grey had it in mind to refuse, but on second thought, it might be helpful. If Trevelyan felt relaxed, he might divulge more than otherwise—and wine had certainly worked to induce a spirit of cooperation in Nessie.

He gave a small nod of acquiescence, and accepted the cup, though he did not drink from it until Trevelyan was likewise equipped. The Cornishman sat back, looking quite unruffled, and lifted his cup a little.

"What shall we drink to, John?"

The gall of the man was staggering—and rather admirable, he had to admit. He lifted his own cup, unsmiling.

"To the truth, sir."

"Oh? Oh, by all means—to the truth!" Still smiling, though with a slight expression of wariness, Trevelyan drained his cup.

It was a tawny sherry, and a good one, though it hadn't settled adequately.

"Just off a ship from Jerez," Trevelyan said, waving at the jug with

an air of apology. "The best I had to hand, I'm afraid."

"It is very good. Thank you," Grey said repressively. "Now—"

"Have another?" Not pausing for reply, Trevelyan refilled both cups. He lowered the jug, and at last took notice of the square of discolored velvet, sitting on his desk like a toad. He prodded it gingerly with a forefinger.

"I ... ah ... confess that I am at something of a loss, John. Does this object have some significance of which I should be aware?"

Grey cursed himself silently for letting the man leave the room; damn it, he'd had time to think, and had obviously decided that a ploy of determined ignorance was best.

"That bit of cloth was taken from the garment on a corpse," he said, keeping his voice level. "A murdered woman."

Sure enough, Trevelyan's left eye twitched, just slightly, and a small, fierce surge of satisfaction burned in Grey's heart. He *did* know!

"God rest her soul, poor creature." Trevelyan folded the cloth over once, quite gently, so the worst of the blood was hidden. "Who was she? What happened to her?"

"The magistrate is choosing to keep that information private for the moment," Grey said pleasantly, and was rewarded by the jumping of a muscle in Trevelyan's jaw at the word "magistrate." "However, I understand that certain evidence was discovered, suggesting a connexion between this woman and yourself. Given the sordid circumstances, I am afraid that I cannot allow your attachment to my cousin to continue."

"What evidence?" Trevelyan had got control of himself again, and was exhibiting precisely the right degree of outrage. "There cannot possibly be anything linking ... whoever this creature is, to me!"

"I regret that I am unable to acquaint you with the particulars," Grey said, grimly pleased. Two could play the game of ignorance. "But Sir John Fielding is a close friend of the family; he has a natural concern for my cousin's happiness and reputation." He shrugged delicately, implying that the magistrate had tipped him the wink, while withholding any number of sordidly incriminating details. "I thought it better to sever the betrothal, before anything of a scandalous nature should emerge. I am sure you—"

"That is—" Trevelyan wore no powder in the warehouse; his face was becoming blotched with emotion. "That is unspeakable! I have nothing to do with any murdered woman!"

That was true—but only because it hadn't been a woman. To the

truth, indeed!

"As I say, I am unable to deal in particulars," Grey said. "However, I did hear a name, in connexion with the matter. Are you acquainted with a Mr. Scanlon, perhaps? An apothecary?" He took up his cup and sipped, feigning indifference, but watching carefully beneath his lashes.

Trevelyan was master of his face, but not his blood. He kept the expression of outraged bafflement firmly fixed—but his face had gone dead-white.

"I am not, sir," he said firmly.

"Or an establishment called Lavender House?"

"I am not." The bones stood out in Trevelyan's narrow face, and his eyes gleamed dark. Grey thought that if they had been alone in some alley, the man would likely have attacked him.

They sat in silence for a moment. Trevelyan drummed his fingers on the desk, narrow mouth set tight as he thought. The blood began to come back into his face, and he picked up the jug and refilled Grey's cup, without asking.

"See here, John," he said, leaning forward a little. "I do not know to whom you have been speaking, but I can assure you that there is no truth whatever to any rumor you may have heard."

"You would naturally say as much," Grey remarked.

"So would any innocent man," Trevelyan replied evenly.

"Or a guilty one."

"Are you accusing me, John, of having done someone to death? For I will swear to you—on the Book, on your cousin's life, your mother's head, on whatever you like—that I have done no such thing." A slightly different note had entered Trevelyan's voice; he leaned forward and spoke with passion, eyes blazing. For a moment, Grey felt a slight qualm—either the man was a splendid actor, or he was telling the truth. Or part of it.

"I do not accuse you of murder," he said, cautiously seeking another way past Trevelyan's defenses. "However, for your name to be entangled in the matter is clearly a serious concern."

Trevelyan gave a small grunt, settling back a little.

"Any fool can bandy a man's name—many do, God knows. I should not have thought you so credulous, John."

Grey took a sip of sherry, resisting the urge to respond to the insult. "I should have thought, sir, that you would at once be aroused to make inquiry—should you be quite innocent of the matter."

Trevelyan uttered a short laugh.

"Oh, I am aroused, I assure you of that. Why, I should be calling for my carriage at this moment, to go round and speak to Sir John faceto-face—were I not aware that he is presently in Bath, and has been for the last week."

Grey bit the inside of his cheek and tasted blood. God damn him for a fool! How could he have forgotten—Joseph Trevelyan knew everyone.

He was still holding the cup of sherry. He drank it off at a gulp, feeling the liquor sear the bitten place, and set it down with a thump.

"Very well, then," he said, a little hoarsely. "You leave me no choice. I had sought to spare your sensibilities—"

"Spare me? Spare me? Why, you—"

"—but I see I cannot. I forbid you to marry Olivia—"

"You think you can forbid me? You? When your brother—"

"—because you are poxed."

Trevelyan stopped speaking so abruptly that it seemed he had been turned into a pillar of salt. He sat utterly immobile, dark eyes fixed on Grey with a stare so penetrating that Grey felt he meant to see through flesh and bone, plucking out truth from Grey's heart and brain by means of sheer will.

The silver handle of his stick was slick with sweat, and he saw that Trevelyan had gripped the bronze statue so tightly that his knuckles were white. He shifted one hand on his stick for leverage; one move by Trevelyan to brain him, and he'd lay the man out.

As though the small movement had broken some evil spell, Trevelyan blinked, his hand letting go the little bronze goddess. He continued to look at Grey, but now with an expression of concern.

"My dear John," he said quietly. "My dear fellow." He sat back, rubbing a hand across his brow, as though overcome.

He said nothing more, though, leaving Grey to sit there, the sound of his denunciation ringing in his ears.

"Have you nothing to say, Mr. Trevelyan?" he demanded at last.

"Say?" Trevelyan dropped his hand, and looked at him, mouth a little open. He closed it, shook his head slightly, and poured fresh sherry, pushing Grey's cup across to him.

"What have I to say?" he repeated, staring into the depths of his own cup. "Well, I could deny it, of course—and I do. In your present state of mind, though, I am afraid that no statement would be adequate. Would it?" He glanced up, inquiringly.

Grey shook his head.

"Well, then," Trevelyan said, almost kindly. "I do not know where you have acquired these remarkable notions, John. Of course, if you truly believe them, then you have no choice but to act as you are—I see that."

"You do?"

"Yes." Trevelyan hesitated, choosing his words carefully. "Did you ... seek counsel of anyone, before coming here?"

What the devil did the fellow mean by that?

"If you are inquiring whether anyone is cognizant of my whereabouts," Grey said coldly, "they are." In fact, they were not; no one knew he was at the warehouse. On the other hand, a dozen clerks and countless laborers had seen him downstairs; it would take a madman to try to do away with him here—and he didn't think Trevelyan was mad. Dangerous, but not mad.

Trevelyan's eyes widened.

"What? You thought I meant—good gracious." He glanced away, rubbing a knuckle over his lips. He cleared his throat, twice, then looked up. "I merely meant to ask whether you had shared these incredible ... delusions of yours with anyone. I think you have not. For if you had, surely anyone would have tried to persuade you not to pursue such a disastrous course."

Trevelyan shook his head, an expression of worried dismay pursing his lips.

"Have you a carriage? No, of course not. Never mind; I shall summon mine. The coachman will see you safely to your mother's house. Might I recommend Doctor Masonby, of Smedley Street? He has an excellent history with nervous disorders."

Grey was so stricken with amazement that he scarcely felt outraged.

"Are you attempting to suggest that I am insane?"

"No, no! Of course not, certainly not."

Still Trevelyan went on looking at him in that worried, pitying sort of way, and he felt the amazement melting away. He should perhaps be furious, but felt instead an urge to laugh incredulously.

"I am pleased to hear it," Grey said dryly, and rose to his feet. "I shall bear your kind advice in mind. In the meantime, however—your betrothal is at an end."

He had nearly reached the door when Trevelyan called out behind him.

"Lord John! Wait a moment!"

He paused and looked back, though without turning. "Yes?"

The Cornishman had his lower lip caught in his teeth, and was watching Grey with the air of one judging a wild animal. Would it attack, or run? He beckoned, gesturing to the chair Grey had vacated.

"Come back a moment. Please."

He stood, undecided, hearing the thrum of business below, longing to escape this room and this man and lose himself in comings and goings, once more a peaceful part of the clockwork, and not a grain of sand in the cogs. But duty dictated otherwise, and he walked back, stick held tight.

"Sit. Please." Trevelyan waited for him to do so, then sat down slowly himself.

"Lord John. You say that your concern is for your cousin's reputation. So is mine." He leaned across the desk, eyes intent. "Such a sudden breach cannot but give rise to scandal—you know this, surely?"

Grey did, but forbore to nod, merely watching impassively. Trevelyan ignored his lack of response, and carried on, speaking more hurriedly.

"Well, then. If you are convinced of the wisdom of your intention, then plainly I cannot dissuade you. Will you give me a short time, though, to devise some reasonable grounds for the dissolution of the betrothal? Something that will discredit neither party?"

Grey drew breath, feeling the beginnings of something like relief. This was the resolution he had hoped for from the moment he had discovered the sore on Trevelyan's prick. He realized that the situation now bore far more aspects than he had ever thought, and such a resolution would not touch most of them. Still, Olivia would be safe.

Trevelyan sensed his softening, and pushed the advantage.

"You know that merely to announce a severance will give rise to talk," he said persuasively. "Some public reason, something plausible, must be offered to prevent it."

Doubtless the man had an ulterior motive; perhaps he meant to flee the country? But then Grey felt again the vibrations beneath his feet, the boomings of rolling wine casks and thud of heaved crates, the muffled shouts of men in the warehouse below. Would a man of such substance readily abandon his interests, merely to avoid accusation?

Probably not; more likely he had it in mind to use the grace period to cover his tracks completely, or dispose of dangerous complications such as the Scanlons. If he hadn't already done so, Grey thought suddenly.

But there was no good reason to refuse such a request. And he could alert Magruder and Quarry at once—have the man followed.

"Very well. You have three days."

Trevelyan drew breath, as if to protest, but then nodded, accepting it.

"As you say. I thank you." He took the jug and poured more sherry, slopping it a little. "Here—let us drink on the bargain."

Grey had no wish to linger in the man's company, and took no more than a token sip before pushing his cup away and rising. He took his leave, but turned back briefly at the door, to see Trevelyan looking after him, with eyes that would have burned a hole in the door to hell.



Chapter 15

One Man's Poison

If Captain von Namtzen was surprised to see Grey and his valet, there was no evidence of it in his manner.

"Major Grey! How great a pleasure to see you again! Please, you will have some wine—a biscuit?" The tall Hanoverian clasped him by hand and forearm, beaming, and had Tom dispatched to the kitchen and Grey himself seated in the drawing room with refreshments before he could gracefully decline, let alone explain his objective in calling. Once he managed to do so, though, the Captain was helpfulness itself.

"But certainly, certainly! Let me see this list."

He took the paper from Grey and carried it to the window for scrutiny. It was well past teatime, but so near to Midsummer Day, late-afternoon light still flooded in, haloing von Namtzen like a saint in a medieval painting.

He looked like one of those German saints, too, Grey thought a little abstractedly, admiring the cleanly ascetic lines of the German's face, with its broad brow and wide, calm eyes. The mouth was not particularly sensitive, but it did show humor in the creases beside it.

"I know these names, yes. You wish me to tell you ... what?"

"Anything that you can." Tiredness dragged at him, but Grey rose and came to stand beside the Captain, looking at the list. "All I know of these people is that they have purchased a particular wine. I cannot say precisely what the connexion may be, but this wine seems to have something to do with ... a confidential matter. I'm afraid I can say no more." He shrugged apologetically.

Von Namtzen glanced sharply at him, but then nodded, and

returned his attention to the paper before him.

"Wine, you say? Well, that is strange."

"What is strange?"

The Captain tapped a long, immaculate finger on the paper.

"This name—Hungerbach. It is the family name of an old noble house; zu Egkh und Hungerbach. Not German at all, you understand; they are Austrian."

"Austrian?" Grey felt his heart lurch, and leaned forward, as though to make certain of the name on the paper. "You are sure?"

Von Namtzen looked amused.

"Of course. The estate near Graz is very famous for its wines; that is why I say it is strange you bring me this name and say it is about wine. The best of the St. Georgen wines—that is the name of the castle there, St. Georgen—is very famous. A very good red wine they make—the color of fresh blood."

Grey felt an odd rushing in his ears, as though his own blood were draining suddenly from his head, and put a hand on the table to steady himself.

"Don't tell me," he said, feeling a slight numbness about his lips. "The wine is called Schilcher?"

"Why, yes. However did you know that?"

Grey made a small motion with one hand, indicating that it was of no importance. There seemed to be a number of gnats in the room, though he had not noticed them before; they swarmed in the light from the window, dancing motes of black.

"These—the Hungerbach family—some are here, then, in London?"

"Yes. Baron Joseph zu Egkh und Hungerbach is the head of the family, but his heir is a distant cousin, named Reinhardt Mayrhofer—he keeps a quite large house in Mecklenberg Square. I have been there sometimes—though of course with the situation as it now is ..." He lifted one shoulder in acknowledgment of the delicate diplomatic issues involved.

"And this ... Reinhardt. He—is he a small man? Dark, with long ... curling ... h-hair." The gnats had become suddenly more numerous, and illuminated, a nearly solid mass of flickering lights before his eyes.

"However did you—Major! Are you quite well?" Dropping the paper, he grabbed Grey by the arm and guided him hurriedly to the sofa. "Sit, please. Water I will have brought, and brandy. Wilhelm, mach schnell!" A servant appeared briefly in the doorway, then

disappeared at once at von Namtzen's urgent gesture.

"I am quite—quite all right," Grey protested. "Really, there is ... not ... the slightest ... n-need—" But the Hanoverian put a large, firm hand in the center of Grey's chest and pushed him flat on the sofa. Stooping swiftly, he seized Grey's boots and hoisted his feet up as well, all the while bellowing in German for assorted incomprehensible things.

"I—really, sir, you must—" And yet he felt a gray mist rising before his eyes, and a whirling in his head that made it difficult to order his thoughts. He could taste blood in his mouth, how odd.... It mingled with the smell of pig's blood, and he felt his gorge rising.

"Me lord, me lord!" Tom Byrd's voice rang through the mist, shrill with panic. "What you done to him, you bloody Huns?"

A confusion of deeper voices surrounded him, speaking words that slipped away before he could grasp their meaning, and a spasm seized him, twisting his guts with such brutal force that his knees rose toward his chest, trying vainly to contain it.

"Oh, dear," said von Namtzen's voice, quite near, in tones of mild dismay. "Well, it was not such a nice sofa, was it? You, boy—there is a doctor who is living two doors down, you run and fetch him right quick, *ja*?"

Events thereafter assumed a nightmarish quality, with a great deal of noise. Monstrous faces peered at him through a nacreous fog, with words such as "emesis" and "egg whites" shooting past his ears like darting fish. There was a terrible burning feeling in his mouth and throat, superseded periodically by bouts of griping lower down, so intense that he now and then lost consciousness for a few moments, only to be roused again by a flood of sulfurous bile that rose with so much violence that his throat alone provided insufficient egress, and it burst from his nostrils in a searing spew.

These bouts were succeeded by copious outpourings of saliva, welcome at first for their dilution of the brimstone heavings, but then a source of horror as they threatened drowning. He had a dim sense of himself at one point, lying with his head hanging over the edge of the sofa, drooling like a maddened dog, before someone pulled him upright and tried once more to pour something down his throat. It was cool and glutinous, and at the touch of it on his palate, his inward

parts again revolted. At last the dense perfume of poppies spread itself like a bandage across the raw membranes of his nose; he sucked feebly at the spoon in his mouth and fell with relief into a darkness shot with fire.

He woke some unimaginable time later from the disorientation of opium visions, to find one of the monstrous faces of his dreams still present, bending over him—a pallid countenance with bulging yellow eyes and lips the color of raw liver. A clammy hand clutched him by the privates.

"Do you suffer from a chronic venereal complaint, my lord?" the countenance inquired. A thumb prodded him familiarly in the scrotum.

"I do not," Grey said, sitting bolt upright and pressing the tail of his shirt protectively between his legs. The blood rushed from his head and he swayed alarmingly. He seized the edge of a small table by the bed to keep upright, only then noting that in addition to the clammy hands, the dreadful countenance was possessed of an outsize wig and a wizened body clad in rusty black and reeking of medicaments.

"I have been poisoned. What sort of infamous quack are you, that you cannot tell the difference between a derangement of the internal organs and the pox, for God's sake?" he demanded.

"Poisoned?" The doctor looked mildly bemused. "Do you mean that you did not take an excess of the substance deliberately?"

"What substance?"

"Why, sulphide of mercury, to be sure. It is used to treat syphilis. The results of the gastric lavage—What are you about, sir? You must not exert yourself, sir, really, you must not!"

Grey had thrust his legs out of bed and attempted to rise, only to be overcome by another wave of dizziness. The doctor seized him by the arm, as much to keep him from toppling over as to prevent his escape.

"Now, then, sir, just lie back ... yes, yes, that is the way, to be sure. You have had a very narrow escape, sir; you must not imperil your health by hasty—"

"Von Namtzen!" Grey resisted the hands pushing him back into bed, and shouted for assistance. His throat felt as though a large wood-rasp had been thrust down it. "Von Namtzen, for God's sake, where are you?"

"I am here, Major." A large hand planted itself firmly on his shoulder from the other side, and he turned to see the Hanoverian's handsome face looking down at him, creased in a frown.

"You were poisoned, you say? Who is it that would do this thing?"

"A man called Trevelyan. I must go. Will you find me my clothes?"

"But, my lord—"

"But, Major, you have been—"

Grey gripped von Namtzen's wrist, hard. His hand trembled, but he summoned what strength he could.

"I must go, and go at once," he said hoarsely. "It is a matter of duty."

The Hanoverian's face changed at once, and he nodded, standing up.

"Quite so. I will go with you, then."

His statement of intent had quite exhausted Grey's meager reserve of strength, but fortunately von Namtzen took charge, dismissing the doctor, sending for his own coach, and summoning Tom Byrd, who went off at once to fetch Grey's uniform—which had luckily been cleaned—and help him into it.

"I'm very glad as you're alive, me lord, but I will say as you're a man what is hard on his clothes," Byrd said reproachfully. "And this your best uniform, too! Or was," he added, critically examining a faint stain on the front of the waistcoat before holding it up for Grey to insert his arms therein.

Grey, having no energy to spare, said nothing until they were rattling down the road in von Namtzen's coach. The Hanoverian was also wearing his full dress uniform, and had brought the plumed helmet, set upon the seat beside him in the coach. He had also brought a large china bowl of eggs, which he set neatly upon his knees.

"What—?" Grey nodded at the eggs, feeling too weak for more precise inquiry.

"The doctor says that you must have egg whites, frequently and in great quantity," von Namtzen explained, matter-of-factly. "It is the antidote for the mercuric sulphide. And you must not drink water nor wine for two days, only milk. Here." With admirable dexterity, considering the shaking of the coach, he removed an egg from the bowl, cracked it against the rim, and slopped the white into a small pewter cup. He handed this to Grey, thriftily gulped the leftover yolk, and tossed the fragments of eggshell out the window.

The pewter felt cool in his hand, but Grey viewed the egg white within with a marked lack of enthusiasm. Tom Byrd glared at him from the opposite seat.

"You swallow that," he said, in tones of menace. "Me lord."

Grey glared back, but grudgingly obeyed. It felt mildly unpleasant, but he was relieved to discover that the nausea had evidently left him for good.

"How long—?" he asked, glancing out the window. It had been late afternoon of the Thursday; now it was mid-morning—but of which morning?

"It is Friday," von Namtzen said.

Grey relaxed a little, hearing this. He had lost all sense of time, and was relieved to discover that his experience had not in fact lasted the eon it had seemed. Trevelyan would have had time to flee, but perhaps not to escape altogether.

Von Namtzen coughed, tactfully.

"It is perhaps not proper for me to inquire—you must forgive me, if so—but if we are to meet Herr Trevelyan shortly, I think perhaps it would be good to understand *why* he has been seeking to kill you?"

"I don't know whether he did mean to kill me," Grey said, accepting another cup of egg white with no more than a faint grimace of distaste. "He may only have meant to incapacitate me for a time, in order to give himself time to escape."

Von Namtzen nodded, though a slight frown formed itself between his heavy brows.

"We shall hope so," he said. "Though if so, his judgment is regrettably imprecise. If you think he wishes to escape, will he be still in his house?"

"Perhaps not." Grey closed his eyes, trying to think. It was difficult; the nausea had passed, but the dizziness showed a tendency to return periodically. He felt as though his brain were an egg, fragile and runny after being dropped from a height. "One can't make an omelette without breaking eggs," he murmured.

"Oh?" Von Namtzen said politely. "Just so, Major."

If Trevelyan *had* meant to kill him, then the man might well be still at his house; for if Grey were dead, Trevelyan would have sufficient leisure to follow his original plans—whatever they were. If not, though, or if he were not sure that the mercuric sulphide would have a fatal effect, he might have fled at once. In which case—

Grey opened his eyes and sat up.

"Tell the coachman to go to Mecklenberg Square," he said urgently. "If you please."

Von Namtzen didn't question this change of plan, but thrust his

head out of the window and shouted to the coachman in German. The heavy coach swayed as it slowed, making the turn.

Six eggs later, it drew to a stop before the house of Reinhardt Mayrhofer.

Von Namtzen sprang lithely from the coach, put on his helmet, and strode like bold Achilles toward the door of the house, plumes waving. Grey assumed his own hat, paltry and insignificant as this object seemed by comparison, and followed, holding tightly to Tom Byrd's arm lest his knees give way.

By the time Grey reached the doorstep, the door was open, and von Namtzen was haranguing the butler in a flood of German menace. Grey's own German extended to no more than a smattering of parlor conversation, but he was able to follow von Namtzen's demands that the butler summon Reinhardt Mayrhofer, and do it forthwith, if not sooner.

The butler, a square person of middle age with a stubborn cast to his brow, was stoutly withstanding this preliminary barrage by insisting that his master was not at home, but clearly the man had no notion of the true nature of the forces ranged against him.

"I am Stephan, Landgrave von Erdberg," von Namtzen announced haughtily, drawing himself up to his full height—which Grey estimated as roughly seven feet, including feathers. "I will come in."

He promptly did so, bending his neck only sufficiently to prevent the obliteration of his helmet. The butler fell back, sputtering and waving his hands in agitated protest. Grey nodded coolly to the man as he passed, and managed to uphold the dignity of His Majesty's army by navigating the length of the entry hall without support. Reaching the morning room, he made for the first seat in evidence, and managed to sit down upon it before his legs gave way.

Von Namtzen was lobbing mortar shells into the butler's position, which appeared to be rapidly crumbling but was still being defended. No, the butler said, now visibly wringing his hands, no, the master was most certainly not at home, and no, nor was the mistress, alas....

Tom Byrd had followed Grey and was looking round the room in some awe, taking in the set of malachite-topped tables with gold feet, the white damask draperies, and the gigantic paintings in gilded frames that covered every wall. Grey was sweating heavily from the effort of walking, and the dizziness set his head spinning afresh. He took an iron grip upon his will, though, and stayed upright.

"Tom," he said, low-voiced, so as not to draw the attention of the embattled butler. "Go and search the house. Come and tell me what—or who—you find."

Byrd gave him a suspicious look, obviously thinking this a device to get rid of him so that Grey could die surreptitiously—but Grey stayed rigidly upright, jaw set tight, and after a moment, the boy nodded and slipped quietly out, unnoticed by the fulminating butler.

Grey let out a deep breath, and closed his eyes, holding tight to his knees until the spinning sensation eased. It seemed to last a shorter time now; only a few moments, and he could open his eyes again.

Von Namtzen in the meantime appeared to have vanquished the butler, and was now demanding in stentorian tones the immediate assembly of the entire household. He cast a glance over his shoulder at Grey, and interrupted his tirade for an instant.

"Oh—and you will bring me the whites of three eggs, please, in a cup."

"Bitte?" said the butler, faintly.

"Eggs. You are deaf?" von Namtzen inquired, in biting tones. "Only the whites. *Schnell!*"

Stung at this public solicitude for his weakened condition, Grey forced himself to his feet, coming to stand beside the Hanoverian, who—with the butler in full rout—had now removed his helmet and was looking quite pleased with himself.

"You are better now, Major?" he inquired, dabbing sweat delicately from his hairline with a linen handkerchief.

"Much, I thank you. I take it that both Reinhardt Mayrhofer and his wife are out?" Reinhardt, he reflected, was almost certainly out. But the wife—

"So the butler says. If he is not out, he is a coward," von Namtzen said with satisfaction, putting away his handkerchief. "I will root him out of his hiding place like a turnip, though, and then—what will you do, then?" he inquired.

"Probably nothing," Grey said. "I believe him to be dead. Is that the gentleman in question, by chance?" He nodded at a small framed portrait on a table by the window, its frame set with pearls.

"Yes, that is Mayrhofer and his wife, Maria. They are cousins," he added, unnecessarily, in view of the close resemblance of the two

faces in the portrait.

While both had a delicacy of feature, with long necks and rounded chins, Reinhardt was possessed of an imposing nose and an aristocratic scowl. Maria was a lovely woman, though, Grey thought; she was wigged in the portrait, of course, but had the same warm skin tones and brown eyes as her husband, and so was also likely darkhaired.

"Reinhardt is dead?" von Namtzen asked with interest, looking at the portrait. "How did he die?"

"Shot," Grey replied briefly. "Quite possibly by the gentleman who poisoned me."

"What a very industrious sort of fellow." Von Namtzen's attention was distracted at this point by the entrance of a parlor maid, white-faced with nerves and clutching a small dish containing the requested egg whites. She glanced from one man to the other, then held out the dish timidly toward von Namtzen.

"Danke," he said. He handed the dish to Grey, then proceeded at once to catechize the maid, bending toward her in a way that made her press herself against the nearest wall, terrorized into speechlessness and capable only of shaking her head yes and no.

Unable to follow the nuances of this one-sided conversation, Grey turned away, viewing the contents of his dish with distaste. The sound of footsteps in the corridor and agitated voices indicated that the butler was indeed assembling the household, as ordered. Depositing the dish behind an alabaster vase on the desk, he stepped out into the corridor, to find a small crowd of household servants milling about, all chattering in excited German.

At sight of him, they stopped abruptly and stared, with a mixture of curiosity, suspicion, and what looked like simple fright on some faces. Why? he wondered. Was it the uniform?

"Guten Tag," he said, smiling pleasantly. "Are any of you English?"

There were shifty glances to and fro, the focus of which seemed to be a pair of young chambermaids. He smiled reassuringly at them, beckoning them to one side. They looked at him wide-eyed, like a pair of young deer confronted by a hunter, but a glance at von Namtzen, emerging from the morning room behind him, hastily decided them that Lord John was the lesser of the evils on offer, and they followed close on his heels back into the room, leaving von Namtzen to deal with the crowd in the entry hall.

Their names, the girls admitted, with much stammering and

blushing, were Annie and Tab. They were both from Cheapside, bosom friends, and had been in the employ of Herr Mayrhofer for the last three months.

"I gather that Herr Mayrhofer is not, in fact, at home today," Grey said, still smiling. "When did he go out?"

The girls glanced at each other in confusion.

"Yesterday?" Grey suggested. "This morning?"

"Oh, no, sir," Annie said. She seemed a trifle the braver of the two, though she could not bring herself to meet his eyes for more than a fraction of a second. "The master's been g-gone since Tuesday."

And Magruder's men had discovered the corpse on Wednesday morning.

"Ah, I see. Do you know where he went?"

Naturally, they did not. They did, however, say—after much shuffling and contradicting of each other—that Herr Mayrhofer was often given to short journeys, leaving home for several days at a time, two or three times a month.

"Indeed," Grey said. "And what is Herr Mayrhofer's business, pray?" Baffled looks, followed by shrugs. Herr Mayrhofer had money, plainly; where it came from was no concern of theirs. Grey felt a growing metallic taste at the back of his tongue, and swallowed, trying to force it down.

"Well, then. When he left the house this time, did he go out in the morning? Or later in the day?"

The girls frowned and conferred with each other in murmurs, before deciding that, well, in fact, they had neither of them actually seen Herr Reinhardt leave the house, and no, they had not heard the carriage draw up, but—

"He must have done, though, Annie," Tab said, sufficiently engrossed in the argument as to lose some of her timidity. "'Coz he wasn't in his bedroom in the afternoon, was he? Herr Reinhardt likes to have a bit of a sleep in the afternoon," she explained, turning to Grey. "I turns down the bed right after lunch, and I did it that day—but it wasn't mussed when I went up after teatime. So he must have gone in the morning, then, mustn't he?"

The questioning proceeded in this tedious fashion for some time, but Grey succeeded in eliciting only a few helpful pieces of information, most of these negative in nature.

No, they did not think their mistress owned a green velvet gown, though of course she might have ordered one made; her personal maid would know. No, the mistress really wasn't at home today, or at least they didn't think so. No, they did not know for sure when she had left the house—but yes, she was here yesterday, and last night, yes. Had she been in the house on Tuesday last? They thought so, but could not really remember.

"Has a gentleman by the name of Joseph Trevelyan ever visited the house?" he asked. The girls exchanged shrugs and looked at him, baffled. How would they know? Their work was all abovestairs; they would seldom see any visitors to the house, save those who stayed overnight.

"Your mistress—you say that she was at home last night. When is the last time you saw her?"

The girls frowned, as one. Annie glanced at Tab; Tab made a small moue of puzzlement at Annie. Both shrugged.

"Well ... I don't rightly know, my lord," Annie said. "She's been poorly, the mistress. She's been a-staying in her room all day, with trays brought up. I go in to change the linens regular, to be sure, but she'd be in her boudoir, or the privy closet. I suppose I haven't seen her proper since—well, maybe since ... Monday?" She raised her brows at Tab, who shrugged.

"Poorly," Grey repeated. "She was ill?"

"Yes, sir," Tab said, taking heart from having an actual piece of information to impart. "The doctor came, and all."

He inquired further, but to no avail. Neither, it seemed, had actually seen the doctor, nor heard anything regarding their mistress's ailment; they had only heard of it from Cook ... or was it from Ilse, the mistress's lady's maid?

Abandoning this line of questioning, Grey was inspired by the mention of gossip to inquire further about their master.

"You would not know this from personal experience, of course," he said, altering his smile to one of courteous apology, "but perhaps Herr Mayrhofer's valet might have let something drop.... I am wondering whether your master has any particular marks or oddities? Upon his body, I mean."

Both girls' faces went completely blank, and then suffused with blood, so rapidly that they were transformed within seconds into a pair of tomatoes, ripe to bursting point. They exchanged brief glances, and Annie let out a high-pitched squeak that might have been a strangled giggle.

He hardly needed further confirmation at this point, but the girls—

with many stifled half-shrieks and muffling of their mouths with their hands—did eventually confess that, well, yes, the valet, Herr Waldemar, *had* explained to Hilde the parlor maid exactly why he required so much shaving soap....

He dismissed the girls, who went out giggling, and sank down for a moment's respite on the brocaded chair by the desk, resting his head on his folded arms as he waited for his heart to cease pounding quite so hard.

So, the identity of the corpse was established, at least. And a connexion of some sort between Reinhardt Mayrhofer, the brothel in Meacham Street—and Joseph Trevelyan. But that connexion rested solely on a whore's word, and on his own identification of the green velvet gown, he reminded himself.

What if Nessie was wrong, and the man who left the brothel dressed in green was not Trevelyan? But it was, he reminded himself. Richard Caswell had admitted it. And now a rich Austrian had turned up dead, dressed in what certainly appeared to be the same green gown worn by Magda, the madam of Meacham Street—which was in turn presumably the same gown worn by Trevelyan. And Mayrhofer was an Austrian who left his home on frequent mysterious journeys.

Grey was reasonably sure that he had discovered Mr. Bowles's unknown shark. And if Reinhardt Mayrhofer was indeed a spymaster ... then the solution to the death of Tim O'Connell most likely lay in the black realm of statecraft and treachery, rather than the blood-red one of lust and revenge.

But the Scanlons were gone, he reminded himself. And what part, in the name of God, did Joseph Trevelyan play in all this?

His heart was slowing again; he swallowed the metallic taste in his mouth and raised his head, to find himself looking at what he had half-seen but not consciously registered before: a large painting that hung above the desk, erotic in nature, mediocre in craftsmanship—and with the initials "RM" worked cunningly into a bunch of flowers in the corner.

He rose, wiping sweaty palms on the skirt of his coat, and glanced quickly round the room. There were two more of the same nature, indisputably by the same hand as the paintings that decorated Magda's boudoir. All signed "RM."

It was additional evidence of Mayrhofer's connexions, were any needed. But it caused him also to wonder afresh about Trevelyan. He had only Caswell's word for it that Trevelyan's *inamorata* was a

woman—otherwise, he would be sure that the Cornishman's rendezvous were kept with Mayrhofer ... for whatever purpose.

"And the day you trust Dickie Caswell's word about anything, you foolish sod ..." he muttered, pushing himself up from the chair. On his way out the door, he spotted the dish of congealing egg whites, and took a moment to thrust it hastily into the drawer of the desk.

Von Namtzen had herded the rest of the servants into the library for further inquisition. Hearing Grey come in, he turned to greet him.

"They are both gone, certainly. He, some days ago, she, sometime in the night—no one saw. Or so these servants say." Here he turned to bend a hard eye on the butler, who flinched.

"Ask them about the doctor, if you please," Grey said, glancing from face to face.

"Doctor? You are unwell again?" Von Namtzen snapped his fingers and pointed at a stout woman in an apron, who must be the cook. "You—more eggs!"

"No, no! I am quite well, I thank you. The chambermaids said that Mrs. Mayrhofer was ill this week, and that a doctor had come. I wish to know if any of them saw him."

"Ah?" Von Namtzen looked interested at this, and at once began peppering the ranks before him with questions. Grey leaned inconspicuously on a bookshelf, affecting an air of keen attention, while the next bout of dizziness spent itself.

The butler and the lady's maid had seen the doctor, von Namtzen reported, turning to interpret his results to Grey. He had come several times to attend Frau Mayrhofer.

Grey swallowed. Perhaps he should have drunk the last batch of egg whites; they could not taste half so foul as the copper tang in his mouth.

"Did the doctor give his name?" he asked.

No, he had not. He did not dress quite like a doctor, the butler offered, but had seemed confident in his manner.

"Did not dress like a doctor? What does he mean by that?" Grey asked, straightening up.

More interrogation, answered by helpless shrugs from the butler. He did not wear a black suit, was the essential answer, but rather a rough blue coat and homespun breeches. The butler knit his brow, trying to recall further details.

"He did not smell of blood!" von Namtzen reported. "He smelled instead of ... plants? Can that be correct?"

Grey closed his eyes briefly, and saw bunches of dried herbs hanging from darkened rafters, the fragrant gold dust drifting down from their leaves in answer to footsteps on the floor above.

"Was the doctor Irish?" he asked, opening his eyes.

Now even von Namtzen looked slightly puzzled.

"How would they tell the difference between an Irishman and an Englishman?" he said. "It is the same language."

Grey drew a deep breath, but rather than attempt to explain the obvious, changed tack and gave a brief description of Finbar Scanlon. This, translated, resulted in immediate nods of recognition from butler and maid.

"This is important?" von Namtzen asked, watching Grey's face.

"Very." Grey folded his hands into fists, trying to think. "It is of the greatest importance that we discover where Frau Mayrhofer is. This 'doctor' is very likely a spy, in the Mayrhofers' employ, and I very much suspect that the lady is in possession of something that His Majesty would strongly prefer to have back."

He glanced over the ranks of the servants, who had started whispering among themselves, casting looks of awe, annoyance, or puzzlement at the two officers.

"Are you convinced that they are ignorant of the lady's whereabouts?"

Von Namtzen narrowed his eyes, considering, but before he could reply, Grey became aware of a slight stir among the servants, several of whom were looking toward the door behind him.

He turned to see Tom Byrd standing there, freckles dark on his round face, and fairly quivering with excitement. In his hands were a pair of worn shoes.

"Me lord!" he said, holding them out. "Look! They're Jack's!"

Grey seized the shoes, which were large and very worn, the leather across the toes scuffed and cracked. Sure enough, the initials "JB" had been burnt into the soles. One of the heels was loose, hanging from its parent shoe by a single nail. Leather, and round at the back, as Tom had said.

"Who is Jack?" von Namtzen inquired, looking from Tom Byrd to the shoes, with obvious puzzlement.

"Mr. Byrd's brother," Grey explained, still turning the shoes over in

his hands. "We have been in search of him for some time. Could you please inquire of the servants as to the whereabouts of the man who owns these shoes?"

Von Namtzen was in many ways an admirable associate, Grey thought; he asked no further questions of his own, but merely nodded and returned to the fray, pointing at the shoes and firing questions in a sharp but businesslike manner, as though he fully expected prompt answers.

Such was his air of command, he got them. The household, originally alarmed and then demoralized, had now fallen under von Namtzen's sway, and appeared to have quite accepted him as temporary master of both the house and the situation.

"The shoes belong to a young man, an Englishman," he reported to Grey, following a brief colloquy with butler and cook. "He was brought into the house more than a week ago, by a friend of Frau Mayrhofer; the Frau told Herr Burkhardt"—he inclined his head toward the butler, who bowed in acknowledgment—"that the young man was to be treated as a servant of the house, fed and accommodated. She did not explain why he was here, saying only that the situation would be temporary."

The butler at this point interjected something; von Namtzen nodded, waving a hand to quell further remarks.

"Herr Burkhardt says that the young man was not given specific duties, but that he was helpful to the maids. He would not leave the house, nor would he go far away from Frau Mayrhofer's rooms, insisting upon sleeping in the closet at the end of the hall near her suite. Herr Burkhardt had the feeling that the young man was guarding Frau Mayrhofer—but from what, he does not know."

Tom Byrd had been listening to all of this with visible impatience, and could contain himself no longer.

"The devil with what he was doing here—where's Jack gone?" he demanded.

Grey had his own pressing question, as well.

"This friend of Frau Mayrhofer—do they know his name? Can they describe him?"

With strict attention to social precedence, von Namtzen obtained the answer to Grey's question first.

"The gentleman gave his name as Mr. Josephs. However, the butler says that he does not think this is his true name—the gentleman hesitated when asked for his name. He was very ..." Von Namtzen

hesitated himself, groping for translation. "Fein herausgeputzt. Very ... polished."

"Well dressed," Grey amended. The room seemed very warm, and sweat was trickling down the seam of his back.

Von Namtzen nodded. "A bottle-green silk coat, with gilt buttons. A good wig."

"Trevelyan," Grey said, with a sense of inevitability that was composed in equal parts of relief and dismay. He took a deep breath; his heart was racing again. "And Jack Byrd?"

Von Namtzen shrugged.

"Gone. They suppose that he went with Frau Mayrhofer, for no one has seen him since last night."

"Why'd he leave his shoes behind? Ask 'em that!" Tom Byrd was so upset that he neglected to add a "sir," but von Namtzen, seeing the boy's distress, graciously overlooked it.

"He exchanged these shoes for the working pair belonging to this footman." The Hanoverian nodded at a tall young man who was following the conversation intently, brows knitted in the effort of comprehension. "He did not say why he wished it—perhaps because of the damaged heel; the other pair were also very worn, but serviceable."

"Why did this young man agree to the exchange?" Grey asked, nodding at the footman. The nod was a mistake; the dizziness rolled suddenly out of its hiding place and revolved slowly round the inside of his skull like a tilting quintain.

A question, an answer. "Because these are leather, with metal buckles," von Namtzen reported. "The shoes he exchanged were simple clogs, with wooden soles and heels."

At this point, Grey's knees gave up the struggle, and he lowered himself into a chair, covering his eyes with the heels of his hands. He breathed shallowly, his thoughts spinning round in slow circles like the orbs of his father's orrery, light flashing from memory to memory, hearing Harry Quarry say, Sailors all wear wooden heels; leather's slippery on deck, and then, Trevelyan? Father a baronet, brother in Parliament, a fortune in Cornish tin, up to his eyeballs in the East India Company?

"Oh, Christ," he said, and dropped his hands. "They're sailing."



Chapter 16

Lust Is Perjur'd

It took no little effort to persuade both von Namtzen and Tom Byrd that he was capable of independent movement and would not fall facedown in the street—the more so as he was not entirely sure of it himself. In the end, though, Tom Byrd went reluctantly to Jermyn Street to pack a bag, and von Namtzen—even more reluctantly—was convinced that his own path of duty lay in perusing the contents of Mayrhofer's desk.

"No one else is capable of reading whatever papers may be there," Grey pointed out. "The man is dead, and was very likely a spy. I will send someone from the regiment at once to take charge of the premises—but if there is anything urgent in those papers ..."

Von Namtzen compressed his lips, but nodded.

"You will take care?" he asked earnestly, putting a large, warm hand on the nape of Grey's neck, and bending down to look searchingly into his face. The Hanoverian's eyes were a troubled gray, with small lines of worry round them.

"I will," Grey said, and did his best to smile in reassurance. He handed Tom a scribbled note, desiring Harry Quarry to send a German speaker at once to Mecklenberg Square, and took his leave.

Three choices, he thought, breathing deeply to control the dizziness as he stepped into a commercial coach. The offices of the East India Company, in Lamb's Conduit Street. Trevelyan's chief man of business, a fellow named Royce, who kept offices in the Temple. Or Neil the Cunt.

The sun was nearly down, an evening fog dulling its glow like the steam off a fresh-fired cannonball. That made the choice simple; he could not hope to reach Westminster or the Temple before everyone had gone home for the night. But he knew where Stapleton lived; he had made it his business to find out, after the unsettling interview with Bowles.

"You want what?" Stapleton had been asleep when Grey pounded on his door; he was in his shirt and barefoot. He knuckled one bleary eye, regarding Grey incredulously with the other.

"The names and sailing dates for any ships licensed to the East India Company leaving England this month. Now."

Stapleton had both eyes open now. He blinked slowly, scratching his ribs.

"How would I know such a thing?"

"I don't suppose you would. Someone in Bowles's employ does, though, and I expect you can find out where the information is, without undue loss of time. The matter is urgent."

"Oh, is it?" Neil's mouth twisted, and the lower lip protruded a little. His weight shifted subtly, so that he stood suddenly nearer. "How ... urgent?"

"Much too urgent for games, Mr. Stapleton. Put on your clothes, please; I have a coach waiting."

Neil did not reply, but smiled and lifted a hand. He touched Grey's face, cupping his cheek, a thumb drawing languidly beneath the edge of his mouth. He was very warm, and smelt of bed.

"Not all that much of a rush, surely, Mary?"

Grey gripped the hand and pulled it away from his face, squeezing hard, so that the knucklebones cracked in his grasp.

"You will come with me at once," he said, very clearly, "or I will inform Mr. Bowles officially of the circumstances under which we first met. Do you understand me, sir?"

He stared at Stapleton, eye to eye. The man was awake now, blue eyes snapping-bright and furious. He freed himself from Grey's grasp with a wrench and took a half-step backward, trembling with rage.

"You wouldn't."

"Try me."

Stapleton's tongue flicked across his upper lip—not in attempted flirtation, but in desperation. The light was dying, but not yet so far gone that Grey could not see Stapleton's face clearly, and discern the bone-deep fright that underlay the fury.

Stapleton glanced round, to be sure they were not overheard, and gripping Grey's sleeve, drew him into the shelter of the doorway.

Standing so near, it was plain that the man wore nothing beneath his shirt; Grey could see the smoothness of his chest in the open neck, golden skin falling away to alluring shadows farther down.

"Do you know what could happen to me if you were to do such a thing?" he hissed.

Grey did. Loss of position and social ruination were the least of it; imprisonment, public whipping, and the pillory were likely. And if it was discovered that Stapleton's irregular attachments had contributed to a breach of confidence in his duties—which was precisely what Grey was inciting him to do—he would be fortunate to escape hanging for treason.

"I know what will happen to you if you don't do as I tell you," Grey said coldly. He pulled his sleeve away and stepped back. "Be quick about it; I have no time to waste."

It took no more than an hour before they reached a dingy lane and a shabby building that housed a printing shop, closed and shuttered for the night. Without a glance at Grey, Stapleton jumped out of the coach and banged at the door. Within moments, a light showed between the cracks of the shutters, and the door opened. Stapleton murmured something to the old woman who stood there, and slipped inside.

Grey sat well back in the shadows, a slouch hat drawn down to hide his face. The coach was a livery affair, ramshackle enough—but still an oddity in the neighborhood. He could only hope that Stapleton was quick enough in his errand to allow them to remove before some inquisitive footpad thought to try his luck.

The rumble and stink of a night-soil wagon floated through the air, and he tugged the window shut against them.

He was relieved that Stapleton had given in without more struggle; the man was certainly clever enough to have realized that the sword Grey held over his head was a two-edged one. True, Grey claimed to have been in Lavender House only as a matter of inquiry—and the only person who could prove otherwise was the young man with dark hair—but Stapleton didn't know that.

Still, if it came to a conflict of allegations between himself and Stapleton, there was no doubt who would be believed, and Stapleton obviously realized that, as well. What he *didn't* realize, just as obviously, was that Richard Caswell was one of the flies in Mr. Bowles's web. Grey would wager half a year's income that that fat little spider with the vague blue eyes knew the name of every man who had ever walked through the doors of Lavender House—and what they had done there. The thought gave him a cold feeling at the base of the neck, and he shivered, drawing his coat closer in spite of the mildness of the night.

A sudden slap at the window beside him jerked him upright, pistol drawn and pointed. No one was there, though; only the smeared print of a hand, excrement-smeared fingers leaving long dark streaks on the glass as they dragged away. A clump of noxious waste slid slowly down the window, and the guffaws of the night-soil men mingled with the bellows of the coach's driver.

The coach heaved on its springs as the driver stood up, and then there was the crack of a whip and a sharp yelp of surprise from someone on the ground. Nothing like avoiding notice! Grey thought grimly, crouching back in his seat as a barrage of night soil thumped and splattered against the side of the coach, the night-soil men hooting and gibbering like Barbary apes as the coachman cursed, clinging to his reins to stop the team from bolting.

A rattling at the coach's door brought his hand to his pistol again, but it was only Stapleton, flushed and breathless. The young man hurled himself onto the bench across from Grey, and tossed a scribbled sheet of paper into his lap.

"Only two," he said brusquely. "The *Antioch*, sailing from the Pool of London in three weeks time, or the *Nampara*, from Southampton, day after tomorrow. That what you wanted?"

The coachman, hearing Stapleton's return, drew up the reins and shouted to his horses. All too willing to escape the brouhaha, the team threw themselves forward and the coach leapt away, flinging Grey and Stapleton into a heap on the floor.

Grey hastily disentangled himself, still grasping the slip of paper tightly, and clambered back to his seat. Neil's eyes gleamed up at him from the floor of the coach, where he swayed on hands and knees.

"I said—that's what you wanted?" His voice was barely loud enough to carry over the rumble of the coach's wheels, but Grey heard him well enough.

"It is," he said. "I thank you." He might have put out a hand to help Stapleton up, but didn't. The young man rose by himself, long body swaying in the dark, and flung himself back into his seat.

They did not speak on the way back into London. Stapleton sat back, arms folded across his chest, head turned to stare out of the window. The moon was full, and dim light touched the aquiline nose and the sensual, spoilt mouth beneath it. He was a beautiful young man, to be sure, Grey thought—and knew it.

Ought he try to warn Stapleton, he wondered? He felt in some fashion guilty over his use of the man—and yet, warning him that Bowles was undoubtedly aware of his true nature would accomplish nothing. The spider would keep that knowledge to himself, hoarding it, until and unless he chose to make use of it. And once he did—no matter what that use might be—no power on earth would free Stapleton from the web.

The coach came to a stop outside Stapleton's lodging, and the young man got out without speaking, though he cast a single, angry glance at Grey just before the coach door closed between them.

Grey rapped on the ceiling, and the driver's panel slid back.

"To Jermyn Street," he ordered, and sat silent on the drive back, scarcely noticing the stink of shit surrounding him.



Chapter 17

Nemesis

In frank revolt, Grey declined to consume further egg whites. In intractable opposition, Tom Byrd refused to allow him to drink wine. An uneasy compromise was achieved by the time they reached the first posthouse, and Grey dined nursery-fashion upon bread and milk for supper, to the outspoken amusement of his fellow coach passengers.

He ignored both the jibes and the continuous feeling of unease in head and stomach, scratching ferociously with a borrowed, battered quill and wretched ink, holding a lump of milk-sodden bread with his free hand as he wrote.

A note to Quarry first; then to Magruder, in case the first should go astray. There was no time for code or careful wording—just the blunt facts, and a plea for reinforcements to be sent as quickly as possible.

He signed the notes, folded them, and sealed them with daubs of sooty candle wax, stamped with the smiling half-moon of his ring. It made him think of Trevelyan, and his emerald ring, incised with the Cornish chough. Would they be in time?

For the thousandth time, he racked his brain, trying to think if there was some quicker way—and for the thousandth time, reluctantly concluded that there wasn't. He was a decent horseman, but the chances of his managing a hell-bent ride from London to Southampton in his present condition were virtually nil, even had he had a good mount instantly available.

It must be Southampton, he thought, reassuring himself for the hundredth time. Trevelyan had agreed to three days; not enough time to prevent pursuit—unless he had planned on Grey being dead? But in

that case, why bargain for time? Why not simply dismiss him, knowing that he would soon be incapable of giving chase?

No, he must be right in his surmise. Now he could only urge the post coach on by force of will, and hope that he would recover sufficiently by the time they arrived to allow him to do what must be done.

"Ready, me lord?" Tom Byrd popped up by his elbow, holding his greatcoat, ready to wrap round him. "It's time to go."

Grey dropped the bread into his bowl with a splash, and rose.

"See that these are sent back to London, please," he ordered, handing the notes to the postboy with a coin.

"Aren't you a-going to finish that?" Byrd asked, sternly eyeing the half-full bowl of bread and milk. "You'll be needing your strength, me lord, and you mean to—"

"All right!" Grey seized a final piece of bread, dunked it hastily in the bowl, and made his way to the waiting coach, cramming it into his mouth as he went.

The *Nampara* was an East Indiaman, tall in silhouette against a sky of fleeting clouds, her masts dwarfing the other ship traffic. Much too large to approach the quay, she was anchored well out; the doryman rowing Grey and Byrd toward the ship called out to a skiff heading back to shore, receiving an incomprehensible bellow in return across the water.

"Dunno, sir," the doryman reported, shaking his head. "She means to leave on the tide, and it's ebbin' now." He lifted one dripping oar, briefly indicating the gray water racing past, though Grey could not have told which way it was going, under oath.

Still queasy from rocking and bumping for a night and half a day in the post coach to Southampton, Grey was disinclined to look at it; everything in sight seemed to be moving, all in contrary and unsettling directions—water, clouds, wind, the heaving boat beneath them. He thought he might vomit if he opened his mouth, so he settled for a scowl in the doryman's direction and a significant clutching of his purse, which answered well enough.

"She'll be away, mebbe, before we reach her—but we'll try, sir, aye, we'll give it a go!" The man redoubled his efforts, digging hard, and Grey closed his eyes, clinging tight to the scale-crusted slat on which

he sat and trying to ignore the stink of dead fish seeping into his breeches.

"Ahoy! Ahoy!" The doryman's shriek roused him from dogged misery, to see the side of the great merchantman rising like a cliff before them. They were still rods away, and yet the massive thing blotted out the sun, casting a cold, dark shadow over them.

Even a lubber such as himself could see that the *Nampara* was on the point of departure. Shoals of smaller boats that he supposed had been supplying the great Indiaman were rowing past them toward shore, scattering like tiny fish fleeing from the vicinity of some huge sea monster on the point of awaking.

A flimsy ladder of rope still hung from the side; as the doryman heaved to, keeping the boat skillfully away from the monster's side with one oar, Grey stood up, tossed the doryman his pay, and seized a rung. The dory was sucked out from under his feet by a falling wave, and he found himself clinging for dear life, rising and falling with the ship itself.

A small flotilla of turds drifted past below his feet, detritus from the ship's head. He set his face upward and climbed, stiff and slow, Tom Byrd pressing close behind lest he fall, and came at last to the top with his body slimed with cold sweat, the taste of blood like metal in his mouth.

"I will see the owner," he said to the merchant officer who came hurrying hugger-mugger from the confusion of masts and the webs of swaying ropes. "Now, by the order of His Majesty."

The man shook his head, not attending to what he said, only concerned that they not interfere. He was already turning away, beckoning with one hand for someone to come remove them.

"The captain is busy, sir. We are on the point of sailing. Henderson! Come and—"

"Not the captain," Grey said, closing his eyes briefly against the dizzying swirl of the cobweb ropes overhead. He reached into his coat, groping for his much-creased letter of appointment. "The owner. I will see Mr. Trevelyan—now."

The officer swung his head round, looking at him narrowly, and seemed in Grey's vision to sway like the dark mast beside him.

"Are you quite well, sir?" The words sounded as though they were spoken from the bottom of a rain barrel. Grey wetted his lips with his tongue, preparing to reply, but was eclipsed.

"Of course he ain't well, you starin' fool," Byrd said fiercely from

his side. "But that's no matter. You take the Major where he says, and do it smart!"

"Who are you, boy?" The officer puffed up, glaring at Byrd, who was having none of it.

"That's no matter, either. He says he's got a letter from the King, and he does, so you hop it, mate!"

The officer snatched the paper from Grey's fingers, glanced at the Royal Seal, and dropped it as though it were on fire. Tom Byrd set his foot on it before it could blow away, and picked it up, while the officer backed away, muttering apologies—or possibly curses; Grey couldn't tell, for the ringing in his ears.

"Had you best sit down, me lord?" Byrd asked anxiously, trying to dust the footmark off the parchment. "There's a barrel over there that nobody's using just now."

"No, I thank you, Tom, I'm better now." He was; strength was returning after the effort of the climb, as the cold breeze dried the sweat and cleared his head. The ship was a great deal steadier underfoot than the dory. His ears still buzzed, but he clenched his belly muscles and glanced after the officer. "Did you see where that man went? Let us follow; it's best if Trevelyan is not given too much warning."

The ship seemed in complete confusion, though Grey supposed there was some method in it. Seamen scampered to and fro, dropping out of the rigging with the random suddenness of ripe fruit, and shouts rang through the air in such profusion that he did not see how anyone could make out one from another. One benefit of the bedlam, though, was that no one tried to stop them, or even appeared to notice their presence, as Tom Byrd led the way through a pair of half-height doors and down a ladder into the shadowed depths belowdecks. It was like going down a rathole, he thought dimly—are Tom and I the ferrets?

A short passageway, and another ladder—was Tom indeed tracking the officer by smell through the bowels of the ship?—and a turn, and sure enough: The officer stood by a narrow door from which light flooded into the cavernous belowdecks, talking to someone who stood within.

"There he is, me lord," Tom said, sounding breathless. "That'll be him."

"Tom! Tom, lad, is that you?"

A loud voice spoke incredulously behind them, and Grey swung

round to see his valet engulfed in the embrace of a tall young man whose face revealed his kinship.

"Jack! I thought you was dead! Or a murderer." Tom wriggled out of his brother's hug, face glowing but anxious. "Are you a murderer, Jack?"

"I am not. What the devil do you mean by that, you pie-faced little snot?"

"Don't you speak to me like that. I'm valet to his lordship, and you're no but a footman, so there!"

"You're what? No, you're never!"

Grey would have liked to hear the developments of this conversation, but duty lay in the other direction. Heart thundering in his chest, he turned his back on the Byrds, and pushed his way past the ship's officer, ignoring his objections.

The cabin was spacious, with stern windows that flooded the space with light, and he blinked against the sudden brightness. There were other people—he sensed them dimly—but his sole attention was fixed on Trevelyan.

Trevelyan was seated on a sea chest, coatless, with the sleeve of his shirt rolled up, one hand clamping a bloodstained cloth to his forearm.

"Good Christ," Trevelyan said, staring at him. "Nemesis, as I live and breathe."

"If you like." Grey swallowed a rush of saliva and took a deep breath. "I arrest you, Joseph Trevelyan, for the murder of Reinhardt Mayrhofer, by the power of ..." Grey put a hand into his pocket, but Tom Byrd still had his letter. No matter; it was near enough.

A trembling vibration rose under his feet before he could speak further, and the boards seemed to shift beneath him. He staggered, catching himself on the corner of a desk. Trevelyan smiled, a little ruefully.

"We are aweigh, John. That is the anchor chain you hear. And this is my ship."

Grey drew another deep breath, realization of his error coming over him with a sense of fatality. He should have insisted upon seeing the captain, whatever the objection. He should have presented his letter and made sure that at all costs the ship was prevented from sailing—but in his haste to make sure of Trevelyan, his judgment had failed. He had been able to think of nothing but finding the man, cornering him, and bringing him to book at last. And now it was too late.

He was alone, save for Tom Byrd, and while Harry Quarry and Constable Magruder would know where he was, that knowledge would not save him—for now they were a-sail, heading away from England and help. And he doubted that Joseph Trevelyan meant ever to come back to face the King's justice.

Still, they would not put him overboard in sight of land, he supposed. And perhaps he could yet reach the captain, or Tom Byrd could. It might be a blessing that Byrd still held his letter; Trevelyan could not destroy it immediately. But would any captain clap the owner of his ship in irons, or abort the sailing of such a juggernaut, on the power of a rather dubious letter of empowerment?

He glanced away from Trevelyan's wry gaze, and saw, with no particular sense of surprise, that the man who stood in the corner of the cabin was Finbar Scanlon, quietly putting a case of instruments and bottles to rights.

"And where is Mrs. Scanlon?" he inquired, putting a bold face on it. "Also aboard, I assume?"

Scanlon shook his head, a slight smile on his lips.

"No, my lord. She is in Ireland, safe. I'd not risk her here, to be sure."

Because of her condition, he supposed the man meant. No woman would choose to bear a child on board ship, no matter how large the vessel.

"A long voyage then, I take it?" In his muddled state, he had not even thought to ask Stapleton for the ship's destination. Had he been in time, that would not have mattered. But now? Where in God's name were they headed?

"Long enough." It was Trevelyan who spoke, taking away the cloth from his arm and peering at the result. The tender skin of his inner forearm had been scarified, Grey saw; blood still oozed from a rectangular pattern of small cuts.

Trevelyan turned to pick up a fresh cloth, and Grey caught sight of the bed beyond him. A woman lay behind the drapes of gauze net, unmoving, and he took the few steps that brought him to the bedside, unsteady on his feet as the ship shuddered and quickened, taking sail.

"This would be Mrs. Mayrhofer, I suppose?" he asked quietly, though she seemed in a sleep too deep to rouse from easily.

"Maria," Trevelyan said softly at his elbow, wrapping his arm with a bandage as he looked down at her.

She was drawn and wasted by illness, and looked little like her

portrait. Still, Grey thought she was likely beautiful, when in health. The bones of her face were too prominent now, but the shape of them graceful, and the hair that swept back from a high brow dark and lush, though matted by sweat. She had been let blood, too; a clean bandage wrapped the crook of her elbow. Her hands lay open on the coverlet, and he saw that she wore Trevelyan's signet, loose on her finger—the emerald cabochon, marked with the Cornish chough.

"What is the matter with her?" he asked, for Scanlon had come to stand by his other side.

"Malaria," the apothecary replied, matter-of-factly. "Tertian fever. Are you well, sir?"

So close, he could smell it, as well as see it; the woman's skin was yellow, and a fine sweat glazed her temples. The strange musky odor of jaundice reached him through the veil of perfume that she wore—the same perfume he had smelt on her husband, lying dead in a blood-soaked dress of green velvet.

"Will she live?" he asked. Ironic, he thought, if Trevelyan had killed her husband in order to have her, only to lose her to a deadly disease.

"She's in the hands of God now," Scanlon said, shaking his head. "As is he." He nodded at Trevelyan, and Grey glanced sharply at him.

"What do you mean by that?"

Trevelyan sighed, rolling down his sleeve over the bandage.

"Come and have a drink with me, John. There is time enough now; time enough. I'll tell you all you wish to know."

"I should prefer to be knocked straightforwardly on the head, rather than poisoned again—if it is all the same to you, sir," Grey said, giving him an unfriendly eye. To his annoyance, Trevelyan laughed, though he muted it at once, with a glance at the woman in the bed.

"I'd forgotten," he said, a smile still tugging at the corner of his mouth. "I do apologize, John. Though for what the explanation is worth," he added, "I was not intending to kill you—only to delay you."

"Perhaps it was not your intent," Grey said coldly, "but I suspect you did not mind if you did kill me."

"No, I didn't," Trevelyan agreed frankly. "I needed time, you see—and I couldn't take the chance that you wouldn't act, despite our bargain. You would not speak openly—but if you had told your mother, everyone in London would have known it by nightfall. And I could not be delayed."

"And why should you trifle at my death, after all?" Grey asked,

anger at his own stupidity making him rash. "What's one more?"

Trevelyan had opened a cupboard and was reaching into it. At this, he stopped, turning a puzzled face to Grey.

"One more? I have killed no one, John. And I am pleased not to have killed you—I would have regretted that."

He turned back to the cupboard, removing from it a bottle and a pair of pewter cups.

"You won't mind brandy? I have wine, but it is not yet settled."

Despite both anger and apprehension, Grey found himself nodding acceptance as Trevelyan poured the amber drink. Trevelyan sat down and took a mouthful from his cup, holding the aromatic liquid in his mouth, eyes half-closed in pleasure. After a moment, he swallowed, and glanced up at Grey, who still stood, glaring down at him.

With a slight shrug, he reached down and pulled open the drawer of the desk. He took out a small roll of grubby paper and pushed it across the desk toward Grey.

"Do sit down, John," he said. "You look a trifle pale, if you will pardon my mentioning it."

Feeling somehow foolish, and resenting both that feeling and the weakness of his knees, Grey lowered himself slowly onto the proffered stool, and picked up the roll of paper.

There were six sheets of rough paper, hard-used. Torn from a journal or notebook, they bore close writing on both sides. The paper had been folded, then unfolded and tightly rolled at some point; he had to flatten it with both hands in order to read it, but a glance was sufficient to tell him what it was.

He glanced up, to see Trevelyan watching him, with a slightly melancholy smile.

"That is what you have been seeking?" the Cornishman asked.

"You know that it is." Grey released the papers, which curled themselves back into a cylinder. "Where did you get them?"

"From Mr. O'Connell, of course."

The little cylinder of papers rolled gently to and fro with the motion of the ship, and the cloud-shattered light from the stern windows seemed suddenly very bright.

Trevelyan sat sipping his own drink, seeming to take no further notice of Grey, absorbed in his own thoughts.

"You said—you would tell me whatever I wished to know," Grey said, picking up his own cup.

Trevelyan closed his eyes briefly, then nodded, and opened them,

looking at Grey.

"Of course," he said simply. "There is no reason why not—now."

"You say you have killed no one," Grey began carefully.

"Not yet." Trevelyan glanced at the woman in the bed. "It remains to be seen whether I have killed my wife."

"Your wife?" Grey blurted.

Trevelyan nodded, and Grey caught a glimpse of the fierce pride of five centuries of Cornish pirates, normally hidden beneath the suave facade of the merchant prince.

"Mine. We were married Tuesday evening—by an Irish priest Mr. Scanlon brought."

Grey turned on his stool, gawking at Scanlon, who shrugged and smiled, but said nothing.

"I imagine my family—good Protestants that they've all been since King Henry's time—would be outraged," Trevelyan said, with a faint smile. "And it may not be completely legal. But needs must when the devil drives—and she is Catholic. She wished to be married, before ..." His voice died away as he looked at the woman on the bed. She was restless now; limbs twitching beneath the coverlet, head turning uncomfortably upon her pillow.

"Not long," Scanlon said quietly, seeing the direction of his glance.

"Until what?" Grey asked, suddenly dreading to hear the answer.

"Until the fever comes on again," the apothecary replied. A faint frown creased his brow. "It is a tertian fever—it comes on, passes off, and then returns again upon the third day. And so again—and yet again. She was able to travel yesterday, but as you see ..." He shook his head. "I have Jesuit bark for her; it may work."

"I am sorry," Grey said formally to Trevelyan, who inclined his head in grave receipt. Grey cleared his throat.

"Perhaps you would be good enough, then, to explain how Reinhardt Mayrhofer met his death, if not by your hand? And just how these papers came into your possession?"

Trevelyan sat for a moment, breathing slowly, then lifted his face briefly to the light from the windows, closing his eyes like a man savoring to the full the last moments of life before his execution.

"I suppose I must begin at the beginning, then," he said at last, eyes still closed. "And that must be the afternoon when I first set eyes upon Maria. That occasion was the ninth of May last year, at one of Lady Bracknell's salons."

A faint smile flitted across his face, as though he saw the occasion

pass again before his eyes. He opened them, regarding Grey with an easy frankness.

"I never go to such things," he said. "Never. But a gentleman with whom I had business dealings had come to lunch with me at the Beefsteak, and we found we had more to speak of than would fit comfortably within the length of a luncheon. And so when he invited me to go with him to his further engagement, I did. And ... she was there."

He opened his eyes and glanced at the bed where the woman lay, still and yellow.

"I did not know such a thing was possible," he remarked, sounding almost surprised. "If anyone had suggested such a thing to me, I would have scoffed at them—and yet ..."

He had seen the woman sitting in the corner and been struck by her beauty—but much more by her sadness. It was not like the Honorable Joseph Trevelyan to be touched by emotion—his own or others'—and yet the poignant grief that marked her features drew him as much as it disturbed him.

He had not approached her himself, but had not been able to take his eyes off her for long. His attention was noticed, and his hostess had obligingly told him that the woman was Frau Mayrhofer, wife of a minor Austrian noble.

"Do go and speak to her," the hostess had urged, a worried kindness evident in her manner as she glanced at the lovely, sorrowful guest. "This is her first excursion into society since her sad loss—her first child, poor thing—and I am sure that a bit of attention would do her so much good!"

He had crossed the room with no notion what he might say or do—he had no knowledge of the language of condolence, no skill at social small talk; his metier was business and politics. And yet, when his hostess had introduced them and left, he found himself still holding the hand he had kissed, looking into soft brown eyes that drowned his soul. And without further thought or hesitation had said, "God help me, I am in love with you."

"She laughed," Trevelyan said, his own face lighting at the recollection. "She laughed, and said, 'God help *me*, then!' It transformed her in an instant. And if I had been in love with La Dolorosa, I was ... ravished ... by La Allegretta. I would have done anything to keep the sorrow from returning to her eyes." He looked at the woman on the bed again, and his fists curled unconsciously. "I

would have done anything to have her."

She was Catholic, and a married woman; it had taken several months before she yielded to him—but he was a man accustomed to getting what he wanted. And her husband—

"Reinhardt Mayrhofer was a degenerate," Trevelyan said, his narrow face hardening. "A womanizer and worse."

And so their affair had begun.

"This would be before you became betrothed to my cousin?" Grey asked, a slight edge in his voice.

Trevelyan blinked, seeming slightly surprised.

"Yes. Had I had any hopes of inducing Maria to leave Mayrhofer, then of course I should never have contracted the betrothal. As it was, though, she was adamant; she loved me, but could not in conscience leave her husband. That being so ..." He shrugged.

That being so, he had seen nothing wrong with marrying Olivia, thus enhancing his own fortunes and laying the foundation of his future dynasty with someone of impeccable family—while maintaining his passionate affair with Maria Mayrhofer.

"Don't look so disapproving, John," Trevelyan said, long mouth curling a little. "I should have made Olivia a good husband. She would have been quite happy and content."

This was doubtless true; Grey knew a dozen couples, at least, where the husband kept a mistress, with or without his wife's knowledge. And his own mother had said ...

"I gather that Reinhardt Mayrhofer was not so complaisant?" he said.

Trevelyan uttered a short laugh.

"We were more than discreet. Though he would likely not have cared—save that it offered him a means of profit."

"So," Grey hazarded a guess, "he discovered the truth, and undertook to blackmail you?"

"Nothing quite so simple as that."

Instead, Trevelyan had learned from his lover something of her husband's interests and activities—and, interested himself by this information, had set out to gain more.

"He was not a bad intriguer, Mayrhofer," Trevelyan said, turning the cup gently in his hands so as to release the bouquet of the brandy. "He moved well in society, and had a nose for bits of information that meant little by themselves but that could be built up into something of importance—and either sold or, if of military importance, passed on to the Austrians."

"It did not, of course, occur to you to mention this to anyone in authority? That is treason, after all."

Trevelyan took a deep breath, inhaling the spice of his brandy.

"Oh, I thought I would just watch him for a bit," he said blandly. "See exactly what he was up to, you know."

"See whether he was doing anything that might be of benefit to you, you mean."

Trevelyan pursed his lips, and shook his head slowly over the brandy.

"You have a very suspicious sort of mind, John—has anyone ever told you that?" Not waiting for an answer, he went on. "So when Hal came to me with his suspicions about your Sergeant O'Connell, it occurred to me to wonder whether I might possibly kill two birds with one stone, you see?"

Hal had accepted his offer of Jack Byrd at once, and Trevelyan had set his most trusted servant the task of following the Sergeant. If O'Connell did have the Calais papers, then it might be arranged for Reinhardt Mayrhofer to hear about them.

"It seemed desirable to discover what Mayrhofer might do with such a find; who he would go to, I mean."

"Hmm," Grey said skeptically. He eyed his own brandy suspiciously, but there was no sediment. He took a cautious sip, and found that it burned agreeably on his palate, obliterating the murky smells of sea, sickness, and sewage. He felt immeasurably better at once.

Trevelyan had left off his wig. He wore his hair polled close; it was flat and a nondescript sort of brown, but it quite altered his appearance. Some men—Quarry, for instance—were who they were, no matter how attired, but not Trevelyan. Properly wigged, he was an elegant gentleman; shirtsleeved and bareheaded, with the bloodstained bandage about his arm, he might have been a buccaneer plotting the downfall of a prey, narrow face alight with determination.

"So I set Jack Byrd to watch O'Connell, as Hal had asked—but the bugger didn't do anything! Just went about his business, and when he wasn't doing that, spent his time drinking and whoring, before going home to that little seamstress he'd taken up with."

"Hmm," Grey said again, trying and failing notably to envision Iphigenia Stokes as a little anything.

"I told Byrd to try to get round the Stokes woman—see if she might

be induced to wheedle O'Connell into action—but she was surprisingly indifferent to our Jack," Trevelyan said, pursing his lips.

"Perhaps she actually loved Tim O'Connell," Grey remarked, eliciting a pair of raised eyebrows and a puff of disbelief from Trevelyan. Love, evidently, was the exclusive province of the upper classes.

"Anyway"—Trevelyan dismissed such considerations with a wave of the hand—"finally Jack Byrd reported to me that O'Connell had scraped acquaintance with a man whom he met in a tavern. Unimportant in himself, but known to have vague connexions with parties sympathetic to France."

"Known by whom?" Grey interrupted. "Not you, I don't suppose."

Trevelyan gave him a quick glance, wary but interested.

"No, not me. Do you know a man named Bowles, by any chance?"

"I do, yes. How the hell do you know him?"

Trevelyan smiled faintly.

"Government and commerce work hand in hand, John, and what affects one affects the other. Mr. Bowles and I have had an understanding for some years now, regarding the trade of small bits of information."

He would have gone on with his story, but Grey had had a sudden flash of insight.

"An understanding, you say. This understanding—did it have something to do, perhaps, with an establishment known as Lavender House?"

Trevelyan stared at him, one brow raised.

"That's very perceptive of you, John," he said, looking amused. "Dickie Caswell said you were much more intelligent than you looked —not that you appear in any way witless," he hastened to add, seeing the look of offense on Grey's face. "Merely that Dickie is somewhat susceptible to male beauty, and thus inclined to be blinded to a man's other qualities if he is the possessor of such beauty. But I do not employ him to make such distinctions, after all; merely to report to me such matters as might be of interest."

"Good Lord." Grey felt the dizziness threatening to overwhelm him again, and was obliged to close his eyes for a moment. Such matters as might be of interest. The mere fact that a man had visited Lavender House—let alone what he might have done there—would be a "matter of interest," to be sure. With such knowledge, Mr. Bowles—or his agents—could bring pressure to bear on such men, the threat of

exposure obliging them to undertake any actions suggested. How many men did the spider hold, enmeshed in his blackmailer's web?

"So you employ Caswell?" he asked, opening his eyes and swallowing the metallic taste at the back of his throat. "You are the owner of Lavender House, then?"

"And of the brothel in Meacham Street," Trevelyan said, his look of amusement deepening. "A great help in business. You have no idea, John, of the things that men will let slip when in the grip of lust or drunkenness."

"Don't I?" Grey said. He took a sparing sip of the brandy. "I am surprised, then, that Caswell should have revealed to me what he did, regarding your own activities. It was he who told me that you visited a woman there."

"Did he?" Trevelyan looked displeased at that. "He didn't tell me that." He leaned back a little, frowning. Then he gave a short laugh and shook his head.

"Well, it's as my old Nan used to say to me: 'Lie down with pigs, and you'll rise up mucky.' I daresay it would have suited Dickie very well to have me arrested and imprisoned, or executed—and I suppose he thought the opportunity was ripe at last. He believes that Lavender House will go to him, should anything happen to me; I think it is that belief alone that's kept him alive so long."

"He believes it. It is not so?"

Trevelyan shrugged, suddenly indifferent.

"No matter now." He rose, restless, and went to stand by the bed again. He could not keep from touching her, Grey saw; his fingers lifted a damp wisp of hair away from her cheek and smoothed it back behind her ear. She stirred in her sleep, eyelids fluttering, and Trevelyan took her hand, kneeling down to murmur to her, stroking her knuckles with his thumb.

Scanlon was watching, too, Grey saw. The apothecary had started brewing some potion over a spirit lamp; a bitter-smelling steam began to rise from the pot, fogging the windows. Glancing back toward the bed, he saw that England had fallen far behind by now; only a narrow hump of land was still visible through the windows, above the roiling sea.

"And you, Mr. Scanlon," Grey said, rising, and moving carefully toward the apothecary, cup in hand. "How do you find yourself entangled in this affair?"

The Irishman gave him a wry look.

"Ah, and isn't love a grand bitch, then?"

"I daresay. You would be referring to the present Mrs. Scanlon, I collect?"

"Francie, aye." A warmth glowed in the Irishman's eyes as he spoke his wife's name. "We took up together, her and me, after her wretch of a husband left. It didn't matter that we couldn't marry, though she'd have liked it. But then the bastard comes back!"

The apothecary's big clean hands curled up into fists at the thought.

"Waited until I was out, the shite. I come back from tending to an ague, and what do I find but my Francie on the floor, a-welter in her own blood and her precious face smashed in—" He stopped abruptly, trembling with recalled rage.

"There was a man bent over her; I thought he'd done it, and went for him. I'd have killed him, sure, had Francie not come round enough to wheeze out to me as it weren't him but Tim O'Connell who'd beaten her."

The man was Jack Byrd, who had followed O'Connell to the apothecary's shop, and then, hearing the sounds of violence and a woman screaming, had rushed up the stairs, surprising Tim O'Connell and driving him away.

"Bless him, he was in time to save her life," Scanlon said, crossing himself. "And I said to him, I did, that he was free of me and all I had, for what he'd done, though he'd take no reward for it."

At this, Grey swung around to Trevelyan, who had risen from his own wife's side and come to rejoin them.

"A very useful fellow, Jack Byrd," Grey said. "It seems to run in the family."

Trevelyan nodded.

"I gather so. That was Tom Byrd I heard in the corridor outside?"

Grey nodded in turn, but was impatient to return to the main story.

"Yes. Why on earth did O'Connell come back to his wife, do you know?"

Trevelyan and the apothecary exchanged glances, but it was Trevelyan who answered.

"We can't say for sure—but given what transpired later, it is my supposition that he had not gone there in order to see his wife, but rather to seek a hiding place for the papers he had. I said that he had made contact with a petty spy."

Jack Byrd had reported as much to Harry Quarry—and thus to Mr. Bowles—but, loyal servant that he was, had reported it also to his

employer. This was his long-standing habit; in addition to his duties as footman, he was instructed to pick up such gossip in taverns as might prove of interest or value, to be followed up in such manner as Trevelyan might decide.

"So it is not merely Cornish tin or India spices that you deal in," Grey said, giving Trevelyan a hard eye. "Did my brother know that you trade in information as well, when he asked your help?"

"He may have done," Trevelyan replied blandly. "I have been able to draw Hal's attention to a small matter of interest now and then—and he has done the same for me."

It was not precisely a surprise to Grey that men of substance should regard matters of state principally in terms of their personal benefit, but he had seldom been brought so rudely face-to-face with the knowledge. But surely Hal would not have had any part in blackmail—He choked the thought off, returning doggedly to the matter at hand.

"So, O'Connell made some overture to this minor *intrigant*, and you learned of it. What then?"

O'Connell had not made it clear what information he possessed; only that he had something which might be worth money to the proper parties.

"That would fit with what the army suspected," Grey said. "O'Connell wasn't a professional spy; he merely recognized the importance of the requisitions and seized the chance. Perhaps he knew someone in France to whom he thought to sell them—but then the regiment was brought home before he had the chance to contact his buyer."

"Quite." Trevelyan nodded, impatient of the interruption. "I, of course, knew what the material was. But it seemed to me that, rather than simply retrieving the information, it might be more useful to discover who some of the parties interested in it might be."

"It did not, of course, occur to you to share these thoughts with Harry Quarry or anyone else connected with the regiment?" Grey suggested politely.

Trevelyan's nostrils flared.

"Quarry—that lump? No. I suppose I might have told Hal—but he was gone. It seemed best to keep matters in my own hands."

It would, Grey thought cynically. No matter that the welfare of half the British army depended on those matters; naturally, a merchant would have the best judgment! Trevelyan's next words, though, made it apparent that things ran deeper than either money or military dispositions.

"I had learned from Maria that her husband dealt in secrets," he said, glancing over his shoulder at the bed. "I thought to use O'Connell and his material as bait, to draw Mayrhofer into some incriminating action. Once revealed as a spy ..."

"He could be either banished or executed, thus leaving you a good deal more freedom with regard to his wife. Quite."

Trevelyan glanced sharply at him, but chose not to take issue with his tone.

"Quite," he said, matching Grey's irony. "It was, however, a delicate matter to arrange things so that O'Connell and Mayrhofer should be brought together. O'Connell was a wary blackguard; he'd waited a long time to search out a buyer, and was highly suspicious of any overtures."

Trevelyan, restless, got up and moved back to the bed.

"I was obliged to see O'Connell myself, posing as a putative middleman, in order to draw the Sergeant in and assure him that there was money available—but I went disguised, and gave him a false name, of course. Meanwhile, though, I had succeeded from the other end, in interesting Mayrhofer in the matter. *He* decided to cut me out—duplicitous bastard that he was!—and set one of his own servants to find O'Connell."

Hearing Mayrhofer's name from another source, and realizing that the man he spoke to was acting under an assumed identity, O'Connell had rather logically deduced that Trevelyan was Mayrhofer, negotiating incognito in hopes of keeping down the price. He therefore followed Trevelyan from the place of their last meeting—and tracked him with patience and skill to Lavender House.

Discerning the nature of the place from questions in the neighborhood, O'Connell had thought himself possessed of a marked advantage over the man he assumed to be Mayrhofer. He could confront the man at the scene of his presumed crimes, and then demand what he liked, without necessarily giving up anything in return.

He had, of course, been thwarted in this scheme when he found no one at Lavender House who had heard the name Mayrhofer. Baffled but persistent, O'Connell had hung about long enough to see Trevelyan depart, and had followed him back to the brothel in Meacham Street.

"I should never have gone directly to Lavender House," Trevelyan admitted with a shrug. "But the business with O'Connell had taken longer than I thought—and I was in a hurry." The Cornishman could not keep his eyes from the woman. Even from where he sat, Grey could see the flush of fever rising in her pallid cheeks.

"Normally, you would have gone to the brothel first, thence to Lavender House, and back again, in your disguise?" Grey asked.

"Yes. That was our usual arrangement. No one questions a gentleman's going to a bordello—or a whore coming out of one, being taken to meet a customer." Trevelyan said. "But Maria naturally could not meet me there. At the same time, no one would suspect a woman of entering Lavender House—no one who knew what sort of place it is."

"An ingenious solution," Grey said, with thinly veiled sarcasm. "One thing—why did you always employ a green velvet dress? Or dresses, as the case may be? Did you and Mrs. Mayrhofer both employ that disguise?"

Trevelyan looked uncomprehending for a moment, but then smiled.

"Yes, we did," he said. "As for why green—" He shrugged. "I like green. It's my favorite color."

At the brothel, O'Connell had inquired doggedly for a gentleman in a green dress, possibly named Mayrhofer—only to have it strongly implied by Magda and her staff that he was insane. The result was naturally to leave O'Connell in some agitation of mind.

"He was not a practiced spy, as you note," Trevelyan said, shaking his head with a sigh. "Already suspicious, he became convinced that some perfidy was afoot—"

"Which it was," Grey put in, earning himself a brief glance of annoyance from Trevelyan, who nonetheless continued.

"And so I surmise that he decided he required some safer place of concealment for the papers he held—and thus returned to his wife's lodgings in Brewster's Alley."

Where he had discovered his abandoned wife in an advanced state of pregnancy by another man, and with the irrationality of jealousy, proceeded to batter her senseless.

Grey massaged his forehead, closing his eyes briefly in order to counteract a tendency for his head to spin.

"All right," he said. "The affair is reasonably clear to me so far. But," he added, opening his eyes, "we have still two dead men to account for. Obviously, Magda told *you* that O'Connell had rumbled

you. And yet you say you did not kill him? Nor yet Mayrhofer?"

A sudden rustling from the bed interrupted him, and he turned, startled.

"It was I who killed my husband, good sir."

The voice from the bed was soft and husky, with no more than a hint of foreign accent, but all three men jerked, startled as though it had been a trumpet blast. Maria Mayrhofer lay upon her side, hair tangled over her pillow. Her eyes were huge, glazed with encroaching fever, but still luminous with intelligence.

Trevelyan went at once to kneel beside her, feeling her cheek and forehead.

"Scanlon," he said, a tone of command mingled with one of appeal.

The apothecary went at once to join him, touching her gently beneath the jaw, peering into her eyes—but she turned her head away from him, closing her eyes.

"I am well enough for the moment," she said. "This man—" She waved in Grey's direction. "Who is he?"

Grey stood, keeping his feet awkwardly as the deck rose under him, and bowed to her.

"I am Major John Grey, madam. I am appointed by the Crown to investigate a matter"—he hesitated, uncertain how—or whether—to explain—"a matter that has impinged upon your own affairs. Did I understand you to say that you had killed Herr Mayrhofer?"

"Yes, I did."

Scanlon had withdrawn to check his hell-brew, and she rolled her head to meet Grey's gaze again. She was too weak to lift her head from the pillow, and yet her eyes held something prideful—almost insolent, despite her state—and he had a sudden glimmer of what it was that had so attracted the Cornishman.

"Maria ..." Trevelyan set a hand on her arm in warning, but she disregarded it, keeping her gaze imperiously on Grey.

"What does it matter?" she asked, her voice still soft, but clear as crystal. "We are on the water now. I feel the waves that bear us on; we have escaped. This is your realm, is it not, Joseph? The sea is your kingdom, and we are safe." A tiny smile played over her lips as she watched Grey, making him feel very odd indeed.

"I have left word," Grey felt obliged to point out. "My whereabouts are known."

The smile grew.

"So someone knows you are en route to India," she said mockingly.

"Will they follow you there, do you think?"

India. Grey had not received leave from the lady to sit in her presence, but did so anyway. The weakness of his knees owed something both to the swaying of the ship and to the aftereffects of mercury poisoning—but somewhat more to the news of their destination.

Still fighting giddiness, the first thought in his head was relief that he had managed that scribbled note to Quarry. At least I won't be shot for desertion, when—or if—I finally manage to get back. He shook his head briefly to clear it, and sat up straight, setting his jaw.

There was no help for it, and nothing to be done now, save carry out his duty to the best of his ability. Anything further must be left to Providence.

"Be that as it may, madam," he said firmly. "It is my duty to learn the truth of the death of Timothy O'Connell—and any matters that may be associated with it. If your state permits, I would hear whatever you can tell me."

"O'Connell?" she murmured, and turned her head restlessly on the pillow, eyes half-closing. "I do not know this name, this man. Joseph?"

"No, dear one, it's nothing to do with you, with us." Trevelyan spoke soothingly, a hand on her hair, but his eyes searched her face uneasily. Glancing from him to her, Grey could see it, too; her face was growing markedly pale, as though some force pressed the blood from her skin.

All at once, there were gray shadows in the hollows of her bone; the lush curve of her mouth paled and pinched, lips nearly disappearing. The eyes, too, seemed to retreat, going dull and shrinking away into her skull. Trevelyan was talking to her; Grey sensed the worry in his tone, but paid no attention to the words, his whole attention fixed upon the woman.

Scanlon had come to look, was saying something. Quinine, something about quinine.

A sudden shudder closed her eyes and blanched her features. The flesh itself seemed to draw in upon her bones as she huddled deeper into the bedclothes, shaking. Grey had seen malarial chills before, but even so, was shocked at the suddenness and strength of the attack.

"Madam," he began, stretching out a hand to her, helpless. He had no notion what to do, but felt that he must do something, must offer comfort of some kind—she was so fragile, so defenseless in the grip of the disease.

"She cannot speak with you," Trevelyan said sharply, and gripped his arm. "Scanlon!"

The apothecary had a small brazier going; he had already seized a pair of tongs and plucked a large stone that he had heating in the coals. He dropped this into a folded linen towel and, holding it gingerly, hurried to the bedside, where he burrowed under the sheets, placing the hot stone at her feet.

"Come away," Trevelyan ordered, pulling at Grey's arm. "Mr. Scanlon must care for her. She cannot talk."

This was plainly true—and yet she lifted her head and forced her eyes to open, teeth gritted hard against the chills that racked her.

"J-J-Jos-seph!"

"What, darling? What can I do?" Trevelyan abandoned Grey upon the instant, falling to his knees beside her.

She seized his hand and held it hard, fighting the chill that shook her bones.

"T-T-Tell him. If we b-both are d-dead ... I would be j-j-justified!"

Both? Grey wondered. He had no time to speculate upon the meaning of that; Scanlon had hurried back with his steaming beaker, had lifted her from the pillow. He was holding the vessel to her lips, murmuring encouragement, willing her to sip at it, even as the hot liquid slopped and spilled from her chattering teeth. Her long hands rose and wrapped themselves about the cup, clinging tightly to the fugitive warmth. The last thing he saw before Trevelyan forced him from the cabin was the emerald ring, hanging loose from a bony finger.

He followed Trevelyan upward through the shadows to the open deck. The bedlam of setting sail had subsided now, and half the crew had vanished below. Grey had barely noticed his surroundings earlier; now he saw the clouds of snowy canvas billowing above, and the polished wood and brightwork of the ship. The *Nampara* was under full sail and flying like a live thing; he could feel the ship—feel *her*; they called ships "she"—humming beneath his feet, and felt a sudden unexpected exhilaration.

The waves had changed from the gray of the harbor to the lapis blue of deep sea, and a brisk wind blew through his hair, carrying away the smells of illness and confinement. The last remnants of his own illness seemed also to blow away on that wind—perhaps only because his debilities seemed inconsequent, by contrast with the desperate straits of the woman below.

There was still bustle on deck, and shouting to and fro between the deck and the mysterious realm of canvas above, but it was more orderly, less obtrusive now. Trevelyan made his way toward the stern, finding a place at the rail where they would not obstruct the sailors' work, and there they leaned for a time, wind cleansing them, watching together as the final sight of England disappeared in distant mist.

"Will she die, do you think?" Grey asked eventually. It was the thought uppermost in his own mind; it must be so for Trevelyan as well.

"No," the Cornishman snapped. "She will not." He leaned on the rail, staring moodily into the racing water.

Grey didn't speak, merely closed his eyes and let the glitter of the sun off the waves make dancing patterns of red and black inside his lids. He needn't push; there was time now for everything.

"She is worse," Trevelyan said at last, unable to bear the silence. "She shouldn't be. I have seen malaria often; the first attack is normally the worst—if there is cinchona for treatment, subsequent attacks grow less frequent, less severe. Scanlon says so, too," he added, almost as an afterthought.

"Has she suffered long with the disease?" Grey asked, curious. It was not a malady that often afflicted city-dwellers, but the lady might perhaps have acquired it in the course of traveling with Mayrhofer.

"Two weeks."

Grey opened his eyes, to see Trevelyan standing upright, his short hair flicked into a crest by the wind, chin raised. Water stood in his eyes; perhaps it was caused by the rushing wind.

"I should not have let him do it," Trevelyan muttered. His hands clenched on the rail in a futile rage tinged with despair. "Christ, how could I have let him do it?"

"Who?" Grey asked.

"Scanlon, of course." Trevelyan turned away momentarily, rubbing a wrist across his eyes, then dropped back, leaning against the rail, his back to the sea. He folded his arms across his chest and stared moodily ahead, intent on whatever dire visions he harbored within.

"Let us walk," Grey suggested, after a moment. "Come; the air will

do you good."

Trevelyan hesitated, but then shrugged and assented. They walked in silence for some time, circling the deck, dodging seamen about their tasks.

Mindful of his leather-heeled boots and the heaving deck, Grey strode carefully at first, but the boards were dry, and the motion of the ship a stimulus to his senses; despite his own predicament, he felt his spirits rise with the blood that surged through his cheeks and refreshed his cramped limbs. He began to feel truly himself again for the first time in days.

True, he was captive on a ship headed for India, and thus unlikely to see home again soon. But he was a soldier, used to long journeys and separations—and the thought of India, with all its mysteries of light and histories of blood, was undeniably exciting. And Quarry could be trusted to inform his family that he was likely still alive.

What would his family do about the wedding preparations? he wondered. Trevelyan's abrupt flight would be an enormous scandal, and an even greater one if word got out—which indubitably it would —of the involvement of Frau Mayrhofer and of her husband's shocking murder. He was not disposed to believe the lady's claim to have killed Mayrhofer; not after seeing the body. Even in health, for a woman to have done *that* ... and Maria Mayrhofer was slightly built, no larger than his cousin Olivia.

Poor Olivia; her name would be spread over the London broadsheets for weeks as the jilted fiancée—but at least her personal reputation would be spared. Thank God the affair had come to a head before the wedding, and not afterward. That was something.

Would Trevelyan have bolted, had Grey not confronted him? Or would he have stayed—married Olivia, gone on running his companies, dabbling in politics, moving in society as the intimate of dukes and ministers, maintaining his facade as a rock-solid merchant—while privately carrying on his passionate affair with the widow Mayrhofer?

Grey cast a sidelong glance at his companion. The Cornishman's face was still dark, but that brief glimpse of despair had vanished, leaving his jaw set with determination.

What could the man be thinking? To flee as he had, leaving scandal in his wake, would have disastrous consequences for his business affairs. His companies, their investors, his clients, the miners and laborers, captains and seamen, clerks and warehousemen who worked for the companies—even the brother in Parliament; all would be affected by Trevelyan's flight.

Still, his jaw was set, and he walked like a man making for a distant goal, rather than one out for a casual stroll.

Grey recognized both the determination and the power of will from which it sprang, but he also was beginning to realize that the facade of the solid merchant was just that; beneath it lay a mind like quicksilver, able to sum up circumstances and change tack in an instant—and more than ruthless in its decisions.

He realized with a lurch of the heart that Trevelyan reminded him in some small way of Jamie Fraser. But no: Fraser was ruthless and quick, and might be equally passionate in his feelings—but above all, he was a man of honor.

By contrast, he could now see the deep selfishness that underlay Trevelyan's character. Jamie Fraser would not have abandoned those who depended on him, not even for the sake of a woman who—Grey was forced to admit—he clearly loved beyond life itself. As for the notion of his stealing another man's wife, it was inconceivable.

A romantic or a novelist might count the world well lost for love. So far as Grey's own opinion counted, a love that sacrificed honor was less honest than simple lust, and degraded those who professed to glory in it.

"Me lord!"

He glanced up at the cry, and saw the two Byrds hanging like apples in the rigging just above. He waved, glad that at least Tom Byrd had found his brother. Would someone think to send word to the Byrd household? he wondered. Or would they be left in uncertainty as to the fate of *two* of their sons?

That thought depressed him, and a worse one followed on the heels of it. While he had recovered the requisitions, he could tell no one that he had done so and that the information was safe. By the time he reached any port from which word could be sent, the War Office would long since have been obliged to act.

And they would be acting on the assumption that the intelligence had in fact fallen into enemy hands—a staggering assumption, in terms of the strategic readjustments required, and their expense. An expense that might be paid in lives, as well as money. He pressed an elbow against his side, feeling the crackle of the papers he had tucked away, fighting a sudden impulse to throw himself overboard and swim toward England until exhaustion pulled him down. He had

succeeded—and yet the result would be the same as though he had failed utterly.

Beyond the ruin of his own career, great damage would be done to Harry Quarry and the regiment—and to Hal. To have harbored a spy in the ranks was bad enough; to have failed to catch him in time was far worse.

In the end, it seemed he would have no more than the satisfaction of finally hearing the truth. He had heard but a fraction of it so far—but it was a long way to India, and with both Trevelyan and Scanlon trapped here with him, he was sure of discovering everything, at last.

"How did you know that I was poxed?" Trevelyan asked abruptly.

"Saw your prick, over the piss-pots at the Beefsteak," he replied bluntly. It seemed absurd now that he should have suffered a moment's shame or hesitation in the matter. And yet—would it have made a difference, if he had spoken out at once?

Trevelyan gave a small grunt of surprise.

"Did you? I do not even recall seeing you there. But I suppose I was distracted."

He was clearly distracted now; his step had slowed, and a seaman carrying a small cask was obliged to swerve in order to avoid collision. Grey took Trevelyan by the sleeve and led him into the lee of the forward mast, where a huge water barrel stood, a tin cup attached to it by a narrow chain.

Grey gulped water from the cup, even in his depression taking some pleasure from the feel of it, cool in his mouth. It was the first thing he had been able to taste properly in days.

"That must have been ..." Trevelyan squinted, calculating. "Early June—the sixth?"

"About that. Does it matter?"

Trevelyan shrugged and took the dipper.

"Not really. It's only that that was when I first noticed the sore myself."

"Rather a shock, I suppose," Grey said.

"Rather," Trevelyan replied dryly. He drank, then dropped the tin cup back into the barrel.

"Perhaps it would have been better to say nothing," the Cornishman went on, as though to himself. "But ... no. That wouldn't have done." He waved a hand, dismissing whatever his thought had been.

"I could scarcely believe it. Went about in a daze for the rest of the day, and spent the night wondering what to do—but I knew it was

Mayrhofer; it had to be."

Looking up, he caught sight of Grey's face, and a wry smile broke out upon his own.

"No, not directly. Through Maria. I had shared no woman's bed since I began with her, and that was more than a year before. But clearly she had been infected by her whore-mongering bastard of a husband; she was innocent."

Not only innocent, but clearly ignorant as well. Not wishing to confront her with his discovery at once, Trevelyan had gone in search of her doctor instead.

"I said that she had lost a child, just before I met her? I got the doctor who attended her to talk; he confirmed that the child had been malformed, owing to the mother's syphilitic condition—but naturally he had kept quiet about that."

Trevelyan's fingers drummed restlessly on the lid of the barrel.

"The child was born malformed, but alive—it died in the cradle, a day after birth. Mayrhofer smothered it, wishing neither to be burdened by it nor to have his wife learn the cause of its misfortune."

Grey felt his stomach contract.

"How do you know this?"

Trevelyan rubbed a hand over his face, as though tired.

"Reinhardt admitted it to her—to Maria. I brought the doctor to her, you see; forced him to tell her what he had told me. I thought—if she knew what Mayrhofer had done, infecting her, dooming their child, that perhaps she would leave him."

She did not. Hearing out the doctor in numb silence, she had sat for a long time, considering, and then asked both Trevelyan and the doctor to go; she would be alone.

She had stayed alone for a week. Her husband was away, and she saw no one save the servants who brought her meals—all sent away, untouched.

"She thought of self-murder, she told me," Trevelyan said, staring out toward the endless sea. "Better, she thought, to end it cleanly than to die slowly, in such fashion. Have you ever seen someone dying of the syphilis, Grey?"

"Yes," Grey said, the bad taste creeping back into his mouth. "In Bedlam."

One in particular, a man whose disease had deprived him both of nose and balance, so that he reeled drunkenly across the floor, crashing helplessly into the other inmates, foot stuck in a night bucket, tears and snot streaming over his rutted face. He could but hope that the syphilis had taken the man's reason, as well, so that he was in ignorance of his situation.

He looked then at Trevelyan, envisioning for the first time that clever, narrow face, ruined and drooling. It would happen, he realized with a small shock. The only question was how long it might be before the symptoms became clear.

"If it were me, I might think of suicide, too," he said.

Trevelyan met his eyes, then smiled ruefully.

"Would you? We are different, then," he said, with no tone of judgment in the observation. "That course never occurred to me, until Maria showed me her pistol, and told me what she had been thinking."

"You thought only of how the fact might be used to separate the lady from her husband?" Grey said, hearing the edge in his own voice.

"No," Trevelyan replied, seeming unoffended. "Though that had been my goal since I met her; I did not propose to give it up. I tried to see her, after she had sent me away, but she would not receive me."

Instead, Trevelyan had set himself to discover what remedy might be available.

"Jack Byrd knew of the difficulty; it was he who informed me that Finbar Scanlon seemed an able man in such matters. He had gone back to the apothecary's shop, to inquire after Mrs. O'Connell's welfare, and had become well acquainted with Scanlon, you see."

"And that is where you met Sergeant O'Connell, returning to his home?" Grey asked, sudden enlightenment coming upon him. Trevelyan already knew of O'Connell's peculations, and certainly had more men than Jack Byrd at his beck and call. He would have been more than capable, Grey thought, of having the Sergeant murdered, abstracting the papers for his own purposes regarding Mayrhofer. And those purposes now fulfilled, of course he could casually hand the papers back, uncaring of what damage had been done in the meantime!

He felt his blood rising at the thought—but Trevelyan was staring at him blankly.

"No," he said. "I met O'Connell only the once, myself. Vicious sort," he added, reflectively.

"And you did not have him killed?" Grey demanded, skepticism clear in his voice.

"No, why should I?" Trevelyan frowned at him a little; then his

brow cleared.

"You thought I had him done in, in order to get the papers?" Trevelyan's mouth twitched; he seemed to be finding something funny in the notion. "My God, John, you do have the most squalid opinion of my character!"

"You think it unjustified, do you?" Grey inquired acidly.

"No, I suppose not," Trevelyan admitted, wiping a knuckle under his nose. He had not been recently shaved, and tiny drops of water were condensing on the sprouting whiskers, giving him a silvered look.

"But no," he repeated. "I told you I had killed no one—nor had I anything to do with O'Connell's death. That story belongs to Mr. Scanlon, and I am sure he will tell it to you, as soon as he is at liberty."

Trevelyan glanced, as though despite himself, at the door that led to the quarters below, and then away.

"Should you be with her?" Grey asked quietly. "Go, if you like. I can wait."

Trevelyan shook his head and glanced away.

"I cannot help," he said. "And I can scarcely bear to see her in such straits. Scanlon will fetch me if—if I am needed."

Seeming to detect some unspoken accusation in Grey's manner, he looked up defensively.

"I did stay with her, the last time the fever came on. She sent me away, saying that it disturbed her to see my agitation. She prefers to be alone, when ... things go wrong."

"Indeed. As she was after learning the truth from the doctor, you said."

Trevelyan took a deep breath, and squared his shoulders, as though setting himself for some unpleasant task.

"Yes," he said bleakly. "Then."

She had been alone for a week, save for the servants, who kept away at her own request. No one knew how long she had sat alone, that final day in her white-draped boudoir. It was long past dark when her husband had finally returned, somewhat the worse for drink, but still coherent enough to understand her accusation, her demand for the truth about her child.

"She said that he laughed," Trevelyan said, his tone remote, as though reporting some business disaster; a mine cave-in, perhaps, or a sunken ship. "He told her then that he had killed the child; told her that she should be grateful to him, that he had saved her from living day after day with the shame of its deformity."

At this, the woman who had lived patiently for years with the knowledge of infidelity and promiscuity felt the bonds of her vows break asunder, and Maria Mayrhofer had stepped across that thin line of prohibition that separates justice from vengeance. Mad with rage and sorrow, she had flung back in his teeth all the insults she had suffered through the years of their marriage, threatening to expose all his tawdry affairs, to reveal his syphilitic condition to society, to denounce him openly as a murderer.

The threats had sobered Mayrhofer slightly. Staggering from his wife's presence, he had left her raging and weeping. She had the pistol that had been her constant companion through her week of brooding, ready to hand. She had hunted often in the hills near her Austrian home, was accustomed to guns; it was the work of a moment to load and prime the weapon.

"I do not know for sure what she intended," Trevelyan said, his eyes fixed on a flight of gulls that wheeled over the ocean, diving for fish. "She told me that she didn't know, herself. Perhaps she meant to kill herself—or both of them."

As it was, the door to her boudoir had opened a few minutes later, and her husband lurched back in, clad in the green velvet dress which she wore to her assignations with Trevelyan. Flushed with drink and temper, he taunted her, saying that she dared not expose him—or he would see that both she and her precious lover paid a worse price. What would become of Joseph Trevelyan, he demanded, lurching against the doorframe, once it was known that he was not only an adulterer but also a sodomite?

"And so she shot him," Trevelyan concluded, with a slight shrug. "Straight through the heart. Can you blame her?"

"How do you suppose he learned of your assignations at Lavender House?" Grey asked, ignoring the question. He wondered with a certain misgiving what Richard Caswell might have told about his own presence there, years before. Trevelyan had not mentioned it, and surely he would have, if ...

Trevelyan shook his head, sighed, and closed his eyes against the glare of the sun off the water.

"I don't know. As I said, Reinhardt Mayrhofer was an intriguer. He had his sources of information—and he knew Magda, who came from the village near his estate. I paid her well, but perhaps he paid her

better. You can never trust a whore, after all," he added, with a slight tinge of bitterness.

Thinking of Nessie, Grey thought that it depended on the whore, but did not say so.

"Surely Mrs. Mayrhofer did not smash in her husband's face," he said instead. "Was that you?"

Trevelyan opened his eyes and nodded.

"Jack Byrd and I." He lifted his head, searching the rigging, but the two Byrds had flown. "He is a good fellow, Jack. A good fellow," he repeated, more strongly.

Brought to her senses by the pistol's report, Maria Mayrhofer had at once stepped from her boudoir and called a servant, whom she sent posthaste across the City to summon Trevelyan. Arriving with his trusted servant, the two of them had carried the body, still clad in green velvet, out to the carriage house, debating what to do with it.

"I could not allow the truth to come out," Trevelyan explained. "Maria might easily hang, should she come to trial—though surely there was never a murder so well-deserved. Even were she acquitted, though, the simple fact of a trial would mean exposure. Of everything."

It was Jack Byrd who thought of the blood. He had slipped out, returning with a bucket of pig's blood from a butcher's yard. They had smashed in the corpse's face with a shovel, and then bundled both body and bucket into the carriage. Jack had driven the equipage the short distance to St. James's Park. It was past midnight by that time, and the torches that normally lit the public pathways were long since extinguished.

They had tethered the horses and carried the body swiftly a little way into the park, there dumping it under a bush and dousing it with blood, then escaping back to the carriage.

"We hoped that the body would be taken for that of a simple prostitute," Trevelyan explained. "If no one examined it carefully, they would assume it to be a woman. If they discovered the truth of the sex ... well, it would cause more curiosity, but men of certain perverse predilections also are prone to meet with violent death."

"Quite," Grey murmured, keeping his face carefully impassive. It was not a bad plan—and he was, in spite of everything, pleased to have deduced it correctly. The death of an anonymous prostitute—of either sex—would cause neither outcry nor investigation.

"Why the blood, though? It was apparent—once one looked—that

the man had been shot."

Trevelyan nodded.

"Yes. We thought that the blood might obscure the cause of death, by suggesting that he had been beaten to death—but principally, its purpose was to prevent anyone undressing the body, and thus discovering its sex."

"Of course." Usable clothes found on a corpse would routinely be stripped and sold, either by the constables who found it, by the morgue-keeper who took charge of it, or, at the last, by the gravedigger who undertook to bury the body in some anonymous potter's field. But no one—other than Grey himself—would have touched that sodden, reeking garment.

Had the fact of the green velvet dress not caught Magruder's notice, or if they had had the luck to dispose of the body in another district of the City, it was very likely that no one would have bothered examining the body at all; it would simply have been put down as one of the casualties of London's dark world and dismissed, as casually as one might dismiss the death of a stray dog crushed by a coach's wheels.

"Sir?"

He hadn't heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and was startled to find Jack Byrd standing behind them, his dark face serious. Trevelyan took one look at it, and headed for the doors to the companionway.

"Mrs. Mayrhofer is worse?" Grey asked, watching the Cornishman stumble through a knot of sailors mending canvas.

"I don't know, me lord. I think she may be better. Mr. Scanlon come out and sent me to fetch Mr. Joseph. He says as how he'll be in the crew's mess for a bit, should you want to talk to him, though," he added, as an obvious afterthought.

Grey glanced at the young man, and felt a twitch of recognition. Not the family resemblance to young Tom; something else. Jack Byrd's eyes were still focused on his master, as Trevelyan reached the hatchway, and there was something unguarded in his face that Grey's nervous system discerned long before his mind made sense of it.

It was gone in the next instant, Jack Byrd's face lapsing back into an older, leaner version of his younger brother's as he turned to Grey.

"Will you be wanting Tom, my lord?" he asked.

"Not now," Grey responded automatically. "I'll go and talk to Mr. Scanlon. Tell Tom I'll send for him when I need him."

"Very good, my lord." Jack Byrd bowed gravely, an elegant footman's gesture at odds with his seaman's slops, and walked away, leaving Grey to find his own way.

He made his way downward in search of the crew's mess, scarcely noticing his surroundings, mind belatedly searching for logical connexions that might support the conclusion his lower faculties had leaped to.

Jack Byrd knew of the difficulty, Trevelyan had said, referring to his own infection. It was he who informed me that Finbar Scanlon seemed an able man in such matters.

And Maria Mayrhofer had said that her husband threatened Trevelyan, asking what would happen to him *once it was known that he was not only an adulterer but also a sodomite?*

Not so fast, Grey cautioned himself. In all likelihood, Mayrhofer had only referred to Trevelyan's association with Lavender House. And it was by no means unusual for a devoted servant to be privy to a master's intimate concerns—he shuddered to think what Tom knew of his own intimacies at this point.

No, these were mere shreds of something less than evidence, he was obliged to conclude. Even less tangible—but perhaps the more trustworthy—was his own sense of Joseph Trevelyan. Grey did not think himself infallible, by any means—he would not in a hundred years have guessed the truth of Egbert Jones's identity as "Miss Irons," had he not seen it—and yet he was as certain as he could be that Joseph Trevelyan was not so inclined.

Putting modesty aside for the sake of logic, he blushed to admit that this conclusion was based as much on Trevelyan's lack of response to his own person as to anything else. Such men as himself lived in secrecy—but there were signals, nonetheless, and he was adept at reading them.

So there might in fact be nothing on Trevelyan's side, nothing beyond heartfelt appreciation of a good servant. But there was more than devoted service in Jack Byrd's soul, he'd swear that on a gallon of brandy. So he told himself grimly, clambering monkeylike into the bowels of the ship in search of Finbar Scanlon, and the final parts to his puzzle.

"Well, d'ye see, we're soldiers, we Scanlons," the apothecary said, pouring beer from a jug. "A tradition in the family, it is. Every man jack of us, for the last fifty years, save those born crippled, or too infirm for it."

"You do not seem particularly infirm," Grey observed. "And certainly not a cripple." Scanlon in fact was a handsomely built man, clean-limbed and solid.

"Oh, I went for a soldier, too," the man assured him, eyes twinkling. "I served for a time in France, but had the luck to be taken on as assistant to the regimental surgeon, when the regular man was crapped in the Low Countries."

Scanlon had discovered both an ability and an affinity for the work, and had learned all that the surgeon could teach him within a few months.

"Then we ran into artillery near Laffeldt," he said, with a shrug. "Grapeshot." He leaned back on his stool and, pulling the tail of his shirt from his breeches, lifted it to show Grey a sprawling web of still-pink scars across a muscular belly.

"Tore across me, and left me with me guts spilling out," he said casually. "But by the help of the Blessed Mother, the surgeon was to hand. Seized 'em in his fist, he did, and rammed them right back into me belly, then wrapped me up tight as a tick in bandages and honey."

Scanlon had lived, by some miracle, but had of course been invalided out of the army. Seeking some alternate means of making a living, he had returned to his interest in medicine, and apprenticed himself to an apothecary.

"But me brothers and me cousins—a good number of them still are soldiers," he said, taking a gulp of the ale and closing his eyes in appreciation as it went down. "And happen as none of us much likes a man as plays traitor."

In the aftermath of the attack on Francine, Jack Byrd had told Scanlon and Francine that the Sergeant was likely a spy and in possession of valuable papers. And O'Connell had shouted to Francine in parting that he would be back, and would finish then what he had started.

"From what Jack said about the drab O'Connell stayed with, I couldn't see that he'd likely come back only to murder Francie. That bein' so"—Scanlon raised one eyebrow—"what's the odds he'd come either to take something he'd left—or to leave something he had? And God knows, there was nothing there to take."

Given these deductions, it was no great trick to search Francine's room, and the shop below.

"Happen they was in one of the hollow molds that holds those condoms you was looking at, first time you came into the shop," Scanlon said, one corner of his mouth turning up. "I could see what they were—and fond as I was by then of young Jack, I thought I maybe ought to keep hold of them, until I could find a proper authority to be handin' them over to. Such as it might be yourself, sir."

"Only you didn't."

The apothecary stretched himself, long arms nearly brushing the low ceiling, then settled back comfortably onto his stool.

"Well, no. For the one thing, I hadn't met you yet, sir. And events, as you might say, intervened. I had to put a stop to Tim O'Connell and his mischief. For he did say he'd be back—and he was a man of his word, if nothing else."

Scanlon had promptly set about collecting several friends and relations, all soldiers or ex-soldiers—"And I'm sure your honor will excuse me not mentioning of their names," Scanlon said, with a small ironic bow toward Grey—who had lain in wait in the apothecary's shop, hidden in Francine's room upstairs, or in the large closet where Scanlon kept his extra stock.

Sure enough, O'Connell had returned that very night, soon after dark.

"He'd a key. He opens the door, and comes stealing into the shop, quiet as you please, and goes over to the shelf, picks up the mold—and finds it empty."

The sergeant had swung round to find Scanlon watching him from behind the counter, a sardonic smile on his face.

"Went the color of beetroot," the apothecary said. "I could see by the lamplight coming through the curtain by the stair. And his eyes slitted like a cat's. 'That whore,' he said. 'She told you. Where are they?' "

Fists clenched, O'Connell had bounded toward Scanlon, only to be confronted by a bevy of enraged Irishmen, come pouring down the stair and rushing from the closet, hurdling the counter in their haste.

"So we gave him a bit of what he'd given poor Francie," the apothecary said, face hard. "And we took our time about it."

And the people in the houses to either side had sworn blank-faced that they'd never heard a sound that night, Grey reflected cynically.

Tim O'Connell had not been a popular man.

Once dead, O'Connell plainly could not be discovered on Scanlon's premises. The body therefore had lain behind the counter for several hours, until the streets had quieted in the small dark hours of the morning. Wrapping the body in a sheet of canvas, the men had borne it silently away into the cold black of hidden alleys, and heaved it off Puddle Dock—"like the rubbish he was, sir"—having first removed the uniform, which O'Connell had no right to, and him a traitor. It was worth good money, after all.

Jack Byrd had come back the next day, bringing with him his employer, Mr. Trevelyan.

"And the Honorable Mr. Trevelyan had with him a letter from Lord Melton, the Colonel of your regiment, sir—I think he said as that would be your brother?—asking him for his help in finding out what O'Connell was up to. He explained as how Lord Melton himself was abroad, but plainly Mr. Trevelyan knew all about the matter, and so it was only sense to hand over the papers to him, so as to be passed on to the proper person."

"Fell for that, did you?" Grey inquired. "Well, no matter. He's fooled better men than you, Scanlon."

"Including yourself, would it be, sir?" Scanlon lifted both black brows, and smiled with a flash of good teeth.

"I was thinking of my brother," Grey said with a grimace, and lifted his cup in acknowledgment. "But certainly me as well."

"But he's given you back the papers, sir?" Scanlon frowned. "He did say as he meant to."

"He has, yes." Grey touched the pocket of his coat, where the papers reposed. "But since the papers are presently en route to India with me, there is no way of informing the 'proper authorities.' The effect therefore is as though the papers had never been found."

"Better not to be found, than to be in the hands of the Frenchies, surely?" Doubt was beginning to flicker in Scanlon's eyes.

"Not really." Grey explained the matter briefly, Scanlon frowning and drawing patterns on the table with a dollop of spilled beer all the while.

"Ah, I see, then," he said, and fell silent. "Perhaps," the apothecary said after a few moments, "I should speak to him."

"Is it your impression that he will attend, if you do?" Grey's question held as much incredulous derision as curiosity, but Finbar Scanlon only smiled, and stretched himself again, the muscles of his

forearms curving hard against the skin.

"Oh, I do, yes, sir. Mr. Trevelyan has been kind enough to say as he considers himself within my debt—and so he is, I suppose."

"That you have come to nurse his wife? Yes, I should think he would feel grateful."

The apothecary shook his head at that.

"Well, maybe, sir, but that's more by way of being a matter of business. It was agreed between us that he would see to Francie's safe removal to Ireland, money enough to care for her and the babe until my return, and a sum to me for my services. And if my services should cease to be required, I shall be put ashore at the nearest port, with my fare paid back to Ireland."

"Yes? Well, then—"

"I meant the cure, sir."

Grey looked at him in puzzlement.

"Cure? What, for the syphilis?"

"Aye, sir. The malaria."

"Whatever do you mean, Scanlon?"

The apothecary picked up his cup and gulped beer, then set it down with an exhalation of satisfaction.

"'Tis a thing I learned from the surgeon, sir—the man as saved me life. He told it me while I lay sick, and I saw it work several times after."

"Saw what, for God's sake?"

"The malaria. If a man suffering from pox happened to contract malaria, once he'd recovered from the fever—if he did—the pox was cured, as well."

Scanlon nodded to him, and lifted his cup, with an air of magisterial confidence.

"It does work, sir. And while the tertian fever may come back now and then, the syphilis does not. The fever of it burns the pox from the blood, d'ye see?"

"Holy God," Grey said, suddenly enlightened. "You gave it to her—you infected that woman with malaria?"

"Aye, sir. And have done the same for Mr. Trevelyan, this very morning, with blood taken from a dyin' sailor off the East India docks. Fitting, Mr. Trevelyan thought, that it should be one of his own men, so to speak, who'd provide the means of his deliverance."

"He would!" Grey said scathingly. So that was it. Seeing the scarified flesh of Trevelyan's arm, he had thought Scanlon had merely

bled the man to insure his health. He had had not the faintest idea—

"It is done with blood, then? I had thought the fever was transmitted by the breathing of foul air."

"Well, and so it often is, sir," Scanlon agreed. "But the secret of the cure is in the blood, see? The inoculum was the secret that the surgeon discovered and passed on to me. Though it is true as it may take more than one try, to insure a proper infection," he added, rubbing a knuckle under his nose. "I was lucky with Mrs. Maria; took no more than a week's application, and she was burning nicely. I hope to have a similar good effect for Mr. Trevelyan. He didn't want to start the treatment himself, though, see, until we were safe away."

"Oh, I see," Grey said. And he did. Trevelyan had not chosen to abscond with Maria Mayrhofer in order to die with her—but in hopes of overcoming the curse that lay upon them.

"Just so, sir." A light of modest triumph glowed in the apothecary's eye. "So you see, too, sir, why I think Mr. Trevelyan might indeed be inclined to attend to me?"

"I do," Grey agreed. "And both the army and myself will be grateful, Scanlon, if you can contrive any means of getting that information back to London quickly." He pushed back his stool, but paused for one Parthian shot.

"I think you should speak to him soon, though. His gratitude may be significantly ameliorated, if Frau Mayrhofer dies as a result of your marvelous cure."



Chapter 18

God's Dice

Eight days passed, and Maria Mayrhofer still lived—but Grey could see the shadows in Trevelyan's eyes, and knew how he dreaded the return of the fever. She had survived two more bouts of the fever, but Jack Byrd had told Tom—who had told him, of course—that it was a near thing.

"She ain't much more than a yellow ghost now, Jack says," Tom informed him. "Mr. Scanlon's that worried, though he keeps a good face, and keeps sayin' as she'll be all right."

"Well, I'm sure we all hope she will, Tom." He hadn't seen Frau Mayrhofer again, but what he had seen of her on that one brief occasion had impressed him. He was inclined to see women differently than did most other men; he appreciated faces, breasts, and buttocks as matters of beauty, rather than lust, and thus was not blinded to the personalities behind them. Maria Mayrhofer struck him as having a personality of sufficient force to beat back death itself—if she wanted to.

And would she? He thought that she must feel stretched between two poles: the strength of her love for Trevelyan pulling her toward life, while the shades of her murdered husband and child must draw her down toward death. Perhaps she had accepted Scanlon's inoculum as a gamble, leaving the dice in God's hands. If she lived through the malaria, she would be free—not only of the disease, but of her life before. If she did not ... well, she would be free of life, once and for all.

Grey lounged in the hammock he had been given in the crew's quarters, while Tom sat cross-legged on the floor beneath, mending a

stocking.

"Does Mr. Trevelyan spend much time with her?" he asked idly.

"Yes, me lord. Jack says he won't be put off no more, but scarcely leaves her side."

"Ah."

"Jack's worried, too," Tom said, squinting ferociously at his work. "But I don't know whether it's her he's worried for, or him."

"Ah," Grey said again, wondering how much Jack had said to his brother—and how much Tom might suspect.

"You best leave off them boots, me lord, and go barefoot like the sailors. Look at that—the size of a teacup!" He poked two fingers through the stocking's hole in illustration, glancing reproachfully up at Grey. "Besides, you're going to break your neck, if you slip and fall on deck again."

"I expect you're right, Tom," Grey said, pushing against the wall with his toes to make the hammock swing. Two near-misses with disaster on a wet deck had drawn him to the same conclusion. What did boots or stockings matter, after all?

A shout came from the deck above, penetrating even through the thick planks, and Tom dropped his needle, staring upward. Most of the shouts from the rigging overhead were incomprehensible to Grey, but the words that rang out now were clear as a bell.

"Sail ho!"

He flung himself out of the hammock, and ran for the ladder, closely followed by Tom.

A mass of men stood at the rail, peering northward, and telescopes sprouted from the eyes of several ship's officers like antennae from a horde of eager insects. For himself, Grey could see no more than the smallest patch of sail on the horizon, insignificant as a scrap of paper—but incontrovertibly there.

"I will be damned," Grey said, excited despite the cautions of his mind. "Is it heading for England?"

"Can't say, sir." The telescope-wielder next to him lowered his instrument and tapped it neatly down. "For Europe, at least, though."

Grey stepped back, combing the crowd of men for Trevelyan, but he was nowhere in evidence. Scanlon, though, was there. He caught the man's eye, and the apothecary nodded.

"I'll go at once, sir," he said, and strode away toward the hatchway. It struck Grey belatedly that he should go as well, to reinforce any arguments Scanlon might make, both to Trevelyan and to the captain. He could scarcely bear to leave the deck, lest the tiny sail disappear for good if he took his eyes off it, but the sudden hope of deliverance was too strong to be denied. He slapped a hand to his side, but was of course not wearing his coat; his letter was below.

He darted toward the hatchway, and was halfway down the ladder when one flexing bare foot stubbed itself against the wall. He recoiled, scrabbled for a foothold, found it—but his sweaty hand slipped off the polished rail, and he plunged eight feet to the deck below. Something solid struck him on the head, and blackness descended.

He woke slowly, wondering for a moment whether he had been inadvertently encoffined. A dim and wavering light, as of candlelight, surrounded him, and there was a wooden wall two inches from his nose. Then he stirred, turned over on his back, and found that he lay in a tiny berth suspended from the wall like the sort of box in which knives are kept, barely long enough to allow him to stretch out at full length.

There was a large prism set into the ceiling above him, letting in light from the upper deck; his eyes adjusting to this, he saw a set of shelves suspended above a minuscule desk, and deduced from their contents that he was in the purser's cabin. Then his eyes shifted to the left, and he discovered that he was not alone.

Jack Byrd sat on a stool beside his berth, arms comfortably folded, leaning back against the wall. When he saw that Grey was awake, he unfolded his arms and sat up.

"Are you well, my lord?"

"Yes," Grey replied automatically, belatedly checking to see whether it was true.

Fortunately, it seemed to be. There was a tender lump behind his ear, where he had struck his head on the companionway, and a few bruises elsewhere, but nothing of any moment.

"That's good. The surgeon and Mr. Scanlon both said as you were all right, but our Tom wouldn't have you left, just in case."

"So you came to keep watch? That was unnecessary, but I thank you." Grey stirred, wanting to sit up, and became conscious of a warm, soft weight beside him in the bed. The purser's cat, a small tabby, was curled tight as an apostrophe against his side, purring gently.

"Well, you had company already," Jack Byrd said with a small smile, nodding at the cat. "Tom insisted as how he must stay, too, though—I think he was afraid lest somebody come in and put a knife in your ribs in the night. He's a suspicious little bugger, Tom."

"I should say that he has cause to be," Grey replied dryly. "Where is he now?"

"Asleep. It's just risen dawn. I made him go to bed a few hours ago; said I'd watch for him."

"Thank you." Moving carefully in the confined space, Grey pulled himself up on the pillows. "We're not moving, are we?"

Belatedly, he realized that what had wakened him was the cessation of movement; the ship was rolling gently as waves rose and fell beneath the hull, but her headlong dash had ceased.

"No, my lord. We've stopped to let the other ship come alongside of us."

"Ship. The sail! What ship is it?" Grey sat upright, narrowly missing clouting himself anew on a small shelf above the berth.

"The Scorpion," Jack Byrd replied. "Troopship, the mate says."

"A troopship? Thank Christ! Headed where?"

The cat, disturbed by his sudden movement, uncurled itself with a *mirp!* of protest.

"Dunno. They've not come within hailing distance yet. The captain's not best pleased," Byrd observed mildly. "But it's Mr. Trevelyan's orders."

"Is it, then?" Grey gave Byrd a quizzical glance, but the smooth, lean face showed no particular response. Perhaps it was Trevelyan's orders that had caused them to seek out the other ship—but he would have wagered a year's income that the real order had come from Finbar Scanlon.

He let out a long breath, scarcely daring to hope. The other ship might not be heading for England; it could easily have overtaken them, sailing from England, en route to almost anywhere. But if it should be headed to France or Spain, somewhere within a few weeks' journey of England—somehow, he would get back to London. Pray God, in time.

He had an immediate impulse to leap out of bed and fling on his clothes—someone, presumably Tom, had undressed him and put him to bed in his shirt—but it was plain that there would be some time before the two ships had maneuvered together, and Jack Byrd was making no move to rise and go, but was still sitting there, examining

him thoughtfully.

It suddenly occurred to Grey why this was, and he halted his movement, instead altering it into a reach for the cat, which he scooped up into his lap, where it promptly curled up again.

"If the ship should be headed aright, I shall board her, of course, and go back to England," he began carefully. "Your brother Tom—do you think he will wish to accompany me?"

"Oh, I'm sure he would, my lord." Byrd straightened himself on the stool. "Better if he can get back to England, so our dad and the rest know he's all right—and me," he added, as an afterthought. "I expect they'll be worried, a bit."

"I should expect so."

There was an awkward silence then, Byrd still making no move to go. Grey stared back.

"Will you wish to return to England with your brother?" Grey asked at last, quite baldly. "Or to continue on to India, in Mr. Trevelyan's service?"

"Well, that's what I've been asking myself, my lord, ever since that ship came close enough for Mr. Hudson to say what she was." Jack Byrd scratched meditatively under his chin. "I've been with Mr. Trevelyan for a long time, see—since I was twelve. I'm ... attached to him." He darted a quick glance at Grey, then stopped, seeming to wait for something.

So he hadn't been wrong. He had seen that unguarded look on Jack Byrd's face—and Jack Byrd had seen him watching. He lifted one eyebrow, and saw the young man's shoulders drop a little in sudden relaxation.

"Well ... so." Jack Byrd shrugged, and let his hands fall on his knees.

"So." Grey rubbed his own chin, feeling the heavy growth of whiskers there. There would be time for Tom to shave him before the *Scorpion* came alongside, he thought.

"Have you spoken to Tom? He will surely be hoping that you will come back to England with him."

Jack Byrd bit his lower lip.

"I know."

There were shouts of a different kind overhead: long calls, like someone howling in a chimney—he supposed the *Nampara* was trying to communicate with someone on the troopship. Where was his uniform? Ah, there, neatly brushed and hung on a hook by the door.

Would Tom Byrd wish to go with him when the regiment was reposted? He could but hope.

In the meantime, there was Tom's brother, here before him.

"I would offer you a position—as footman—" he added, giving the young man a straight look, lest there be any confusion about what was and was not offered,"—in my mother's house. You would not lack for employment."

Jack Byrd nodded, lips slightly pursed.

"Well, my lord, that's kind. Though Mr. Trevelyan had made provisions for me; I shouldn't starve. But I don't see as how I can leave him."

There was enough of a question in this last to make Grey sit up and face round in the bed, his back against the wall, in order to address the situation properly.

Was Jack Byrd seeking justification for staying, or excuse for leaving?

"It's only ... I've been with Mr. Joseph for some time," Byrd said again, reaching out a hand to scratch the cat's ears—more in order to avoid Grey's gaze than because of a natural affection for cats, Grey thought. "He's done very well by me, been good to me."

And how good is that? Grey wondered. He was quite sure now of Byrd's feelings, and sure enough of Trevelyan's, for that matter. Whether anything had ever passed between Trevelyan and his servant in privacy—and he was inclined to doubt it—there was no doubt that Trevelyan's emotions now focused solely on the woman who lay below, still and yellow in the interlude of her illness.

"He is not worthy of such loyalty. You know that," Grey said, leaving the last sentence somewhere in the hinterland between statement and question.

"And you are, my lord?" It was asked without sarcasm, Byrd's hazel eyes resting seriously on Grey's face.

"If you mean your brother, I value his service more than I can say," Grey replied. "I sincerely hope he knows it."

Jack Byrd smiled slightly, looking down at the hands clasped on his knees. "Oh, I should reckon he does, then."

They stayed without speaking for a bit, and the tension between them eased by degrees, the cat's purring seeming somehow to dissolve it. The bellowing above had stopped.

"She might die," Jack Byrd said. "Not that I want her to; I don't, at all. But she may." It was said thoughtfully, with no hint of

hopefulness—and Grey believed him when he said there was none.

"She may," he agreed. "She is very ill. But you are thinking that if that were unfortunately to occur—"

"Only as he'd need someone to care for him," Byrd answered quickly. "Only that. I shouldn't want him to be alone."

Grey forbore to answer that Trevelyan would find it hard work to manage solitude on board a ship with two hundred seamen. The to-and-fro bumpings of the crew had not stopped, but had changed their rhythm. The ship had ceased to fly, but she scarcely lay quiet in the water; he could feel the gentle tug of wind and current on her bulk. Stroking the cat, he thought of wind and water as the hands of the ocean on her skin, and wondered momentarily whether he might have liked to be a sailor.

"He says that he will not live without her," Grey said at last. "I do not know whether he means it."

Byrd closed his eyes briefly, long lashes casting shadows on his cheeks.

"Oh, he means it," he said. "But I don't think he'd do it." He opened his eyes, smiling a little. "I'm not saying as how he's a hypocrite, mind—he's not, no more than any man is just by nature. But he—" He paused, pushing out his lower lip as he considered how to say what he meant.

"It's just as he seems so alive," he said at last, slowly. He glanced up at Grey, dark eyes bright. "Not the sort as kills themselves. You'll know what I mean, my lord?"

"I think I do, yes." The cat, tiring at last of the attention, ceased purring and stretched itself, flexing its claws comfortably in and out of the coverlet over Grey's leg. He scooped it up under the belly and set it on the floor, where it ambled away in search of milk and vermin.

Learning the truth, Maria Mayrhofer had thought of self-destruction; Trevelyan had not. Not out of principle, nor any sense of religious prohibition—merely because he could not imagine any circumstance of life that he could not overcome in some fashion.

"I do know what you mean," Grey repeated, swinging his legs out of bed to go and open the door for the cat, who was clawing at it. "He may speak of death, but he has no ..." He, in turn, groped for words. "... no friendship with it?"

Jack Byrd nodded.

"Aye, that's something of what I mean. The lady, though—she's seen that un's face." He shook his head, and Grey noted with interest

that while his attitude seemed one of both liking and respect, he never spoke Maria Mayrhofer's name.

Grey closed the door behind the cat and turned back, leaning against it. The ship swayed gently beneath him, but his head was clear and steady, for the first time in days.

Small as the cabin was, Jack Byrd sat no more than two feet from him, the rippled light from the prism overhead making him look like a creature from the seabed, soft hair wavy as kelp around his shoulders, with a green shadow in his hazel eyes.

"What you say is true," Grey said at last. "But I tell you this. He will not forget her, even should she die. Particularly if she should die," he added, thoughtfully.

Jack Byrd's face didn't change expression; he just sat, looking into Grey's eyes, his own slightly narrowed, like a man evaluating the approach of a distant dust cloud that might hide enemy or fortune.

Then he nodded, rose, and opened the door.

"I'll fetch my brother to you, my lord. I expect you'll be wanting to dress."

In the event, he was too late; a patter of footsteps rushed down the corridor, and Tom's eager face appeared in the doorway.

"Me lord, Jack, me lord!" he said, excited into incoherence. "What they're sayin', what the sailors are sayin'! On that boat!"

"Ship," Jack corrected, frowning at his brother. "So what are they saying, then?"

"Oh, to bleedin' hell with your ships," Tom said rudely, elbowing his brother aside. He swung back to Grey, face beaming. "They said General Clive's beat the Nawab at a place called Plassey, me lord! We've won Bengal! D'ye hear—we've won!"



Epilogue

London August 18, 1757

The first blast shook the walls, rattling the crystal wineglasses and causing a mirror from the reign of Louis XIV to crash to the floor.

"Never mind," said the Dowager Countess Melton, patting a white-faced footman, who had been standing next to it, consolingly on the arm. "Ugly thing; it's always made me look like a squirrel. Go fetch a broom before someone steps on the pieces."

She stepped through the French doors onto the terrace, fanning herself and looking happy.

"What a night!" she said to her youngest son. "Do you think they've found the range yet?"

"I wouldn't count on it," Grey said, glancing warily down the river toward Tower Hill, where the fire-works master was presumably rechecking his calculations and bollocking his subordinates. The first trial shell had gone whistling directly overhead, no more than fifty feet above the Countess's riverside town house. Several servants stood on the terrace, scanning the skies and armed with wet brooms, just in case.

"Well, they should do it more often," the Countess said reprovingly, with a glance at the Hill. "Keep in practice."

It was a clear, still, mid-August night, and while hot, moist air sat like a smothering blanket on London, there was some semblance of a breeze, so near the river.

Just upstream, he could see Vauxhall Bridge, so crowded with spectators that the span appeared to be a live thing itself, writhing and flexing like a caterpillar over the soft dark sheen of the river. Now and then, some intoxicated person would be pushed off, falling with a cannonball splash into the water, to the enthusiastic howls of their comrades above.

Conditions were not quite so crowded within the town house, but give it time, Grey thought, following his mother back inside to greet further new arrivals. The musicians had just finished setting up at the far end of the room; they would need to open the folding doors into the next room, as well, to make room for dancing—though that wouldn't begin until after the fireworks.

The temperature was no bar to Londoners celebrating the news of Clive's victory at Plassey. For days, the taverns had been overflowing with custom, and citizens greeted one another in the street with genial cries condemning the Nawab of Bengal's ancestry, appearance, and social habits.

"Buggering black bastard!" bellowed the Duke of Cirencester, echoing the opinions of his fellow citizens in Spitalfields and Stepney as he charged through the door. "Put a rocket up his arse, see how high he flies before he explodes, eh? Benedicta, my love, come kiss me!"

The Countess, prudently putting several bodies between herself and the Duke, blew him a pretty kiss before disappearing on the arm of Mr. Pitt, and Grey tactfully redirected the Duke's ardor toward the genial widow of Viscount Bonham, who was more than capable of dealing with him. Was the Duke's Christian name Jacob? he wondered darkly. He thought it was.

A few more trial blasts from Tower Hill were scarcely noticed, as the noise of talk and music grew with each fresh bottle of wine opened, each new cup of rum punch poured. Even Jack Byrd, who had been quiet to the point of taciturnity since their return, seemed cheered; Grey saw him smile at a young maid passing through with a pile of cloaks.

Tom Byrd, newly outfitted in proper livery for the occasion, was standing by the bamboo screen that hid the chamber pots, charged with watching the guests to prevent petty thievery.

"Be careful, especially when the fireworks start in earnest," Grey murmured to him in passing. "Take it turn about with your brother, so you can go out to the terrace and watch a bit—but be sure someone's got an eye on my Lord Gloucester all the time. He got away with a gilded snuffbox last time he was here."

"Yes, me lord," Tom said, nodding. "Look, me lord—it's the Hun!"

Sure enough, Stephan von Namtzen, Landgrave von Erdberg, had arrived in all his plumed glory, beaming as though Clive's triumph had been a personal victory. Handing his helmet to Jack Byrd, who looked rather bemused by its receipt, he spotted Grey and an enormous smile spread across his face.

The intervening crowd prevented his passage, for which Grey was momentarily grateful. He was in fact more than pleased to see the Hanoverian, but the thought of being enthusiastically embraced and kissed on both cheeks, which was von Namtzen's habit when greeting friends ...

Then the Bishop of York arrived with an entourage of six small black boys in cloth of gold; a huge *boom!* from downriver and shrieks from the crowd on Vauxhall Bridge announced the real commencement of the fireworks, and the musicians struck up Handel's *Royal Fireworks* suite.

Two-thirds of the guests surged out onto the terrace for a better view, leaving the hard drinkers and those engaged in conversation a little room to breathe.

Grey took advantage of the sudden exodus to nip behind the bamboo screen for relief; two bottles of champagne took their toll. It was perhaps not an appropriate venue for prayer, but he sent up a brief word of gratitude, nonetheless. The public hysteria over Plassey had completely eclipsed any other news; neither broadsheets nor street journalists had said a word on the subjects of the murder of Reinhardt Mayrhofer, or the disappearance of Joseph Trevelyan—let alone made rude speculations concerning Trevelyan's erstwhile fiancée.

He understood that word was being discreetly circulated in financial circles that Mr. Trevelyan was traveling to India in order to explore new opportunities for import, in the wake of the victory.

He had a momentary vision of Joseph Trevelyan as he had been in the main cabin of the *Nampara*, standing by his wife's bed, just before Grey had left.

"If?..." Grey had asked, with a small nod toward the bed.

"Word will come that I have been lost at sea—swept overboard by a swamping wave. Such things happen." He glanced toward the bed where Maria Mayrhofer lay, still and beautiful and yellow as a carving of ancient ivory.

"I daresay they do," Grey had said quietly, thinking once more of Jamie Fraser.

Trevelyan moved to stand by the bed, looking down. He took the woman's hand, stroking it, and Grey saw her fingers tighten, very slightly; light quivered in the emerald teardrop of the ring she wore.

"If she dies, it will be the truth," Trevelyan said softly, his eyes on her still face. "I shall take her in my arms and step over the rail; we will rest together, on the bottom of the sea."

Grey moved to stand beside him, close enough to feel the brush of his sleeve.

"And if she does not?" he asked. "If you both survive the treatment?"

Trevelyan shrugged, so faintly that Grey might not have noticed were he not so close.

"Money will not buy health, nor happiness—but it has its uses. We will live in India, as man and wife; no one will know who she was—nothing will matter, save we are together."

"May God bless you and grant you peace," Grey murmured, reordering his dress—though he spoke to Maria Mayrhofer, rather than Trevelyan. He smoothed the edge of his waistcoat and stepped out from behind the screen, back into the maelstrom of the party.

Within a few steps, he was stopped by Lieutenant Stubbs, burnished to a high gloss and sweating profusely.

"Hallo, Malcolm. Enjoying yourself?"

"Er ... yes. Of course. A word, old fellow?"

A boom from the river made speech momentarily impossible, but Grey nodded, beckoning Stubbs to a relatively quiet alcove near the foyer.

"I should speak to your brother, I know." Stubbs cleared his throat. "But with Melton not here, you're by way of being head of the family, aren't you?"

"For my sins," Grey replied guardedly. "Why?"

Stubbs cast a lingering glance through the French doors; Olivia was visible on the terrace, laughing at something said to her by Lord Ramsbotham.

"Not as though your cousin hasn't better prospects, I know," he said, a little awkwardly. "But I have got five thousand a year, and when the Old One—not that I don't hope he lives forever, mind, but I am the heir, and—"

"You want my permission to court Olivia?"

Stubbs avoided his eye, gazing vaguely off toward the musicians, who were fiddling industriously away at the far end of the room.

"Um, well, more or less done that, really. Hope you don't mind. I, er, we were hoping you might see your way to a marriage before the regiment leaves. Bit hasty, I know, but ..."

But you want a chance to leave your seed in a willing girl's belly, Grey added silently, in case you don't come back.

The guests had all left off chattering, and crowded to the edge of the gallery as the next explosion from the river boomed in the distance. Blue and white stars fountained from the sky amid a chorus of "ooh!" and "ahh!"—and he knew that every soldier there felt as he did the clench in the lower belly, balls drawn up tight at the echo of war, even as their hearts lifted heavenward at the sight of flaming glory.

"Yes," he heard himself say, in the moment's silence between one explosion and the next. "I don't see why not. After all, her dress is ready."

Then Stubbs was crushing his hand, beaming fervently, and he was smiling back, head swimming with champagne.

"I say, old fellow—you wouldn't think of making it a double wedding, would you? There's my sister, you know ..."

Melissa Stubbs was Malcolm's twin, a plump and smiling girl, who was even now giving him an all-too-knowing eye over her fan from the terrace. For a split second, Grey teetered on the edge of temptation; the urge to leave something of himself behind, the lure of immortality before one steps into the void.

It would be well enough, he thought, if he didn't come back—but what if he did? He smiled, clapped Stubbs on the back, and excused himself with courtesy to go and find another drink.

"You don't want to drink that French muck, do you?" Quarry said at his elbow. "Blow you up like a bladder—gassy stuff." Quarry himself had a magnum of red wine clutched under one arm, a large blonde woman under the other. "May I introduce you to Major Grey, Mamie? Major, Mrs. Fortescue."

"Your servant, ma'am."

"A word in your ear, Grey?" Quarry released Mrs. Fortescue momentarily, and stepped in close, his craggy face red and glossy under his wig.

"We've got word at last; the new posting. But an odd thing—"

"Yes?" The glass in Grey's hand was red, not gold, as though it contained the vintage called Schilcher, the shining stuff that was the color of blood. But then he saw the bubbles rise, and realized that the fireworks had changed in color, and the light around them went red and white and red again and the smell of smoke floated in through the French doors as though they stood in the center of a bombardment.

"I was just talking to that German chap, von Namtzen. He wants you to go and be a liaison of sorts with his regiment; already spoken to the War Office, he says. Seems to have conceived a great regard for you, Grey."

Grey blinked and took a gulp of champagne. Von Namtzen's great blond head was visible on the terrace, his handsome profile turned up to the sky, rapt with wonder as a five-year-old's.

"Well, you needn't decide on the spot, of course. Up to your brother, anyway. Just thought I'd mention it. Ready for another turn, Mamie, m'dear?"

Before Grey could gather his senses to respond, the three—Harry, the blonde, and the bottle—had galloped off in a wild gavotte, and the sky was exploding in pinwheels and showers of red and blue and green and white and yellow.

Stephan von Namtzen turned and met his eyes, lifting a glass in salute, and at the end of the room the musicians still played Handel, like the music of his life, beauty and serenity interrupted always by the thunder of distant fire.

Author's Notes and References

Most of my information on the mollies of London comes from MOTHER CLAP'S MOLLY-HOUSE: The Gay Subculture in England 1700–1830, by Rictor Norton, which includes a fairly large bibliography, for those looking for further details. (I was interested to see that—according to this reference—terms such as "rough trade" and "Miss Thing," currently in use, were in existence during the eighteenth century as well.)

While most of the locations mentioned as "molly-walks" are historically known—such as the bog-houses (public privies) of Lincoln's Inn, Blackfriars Bridge, and the arcades of the Royal Exchange—the establishment known as Lavender House is fictional.

While some characters in this book, such as William Pitt, Robert Clive, the Nawab of Bengal, and Sir John Fielding, are real historic personages, most are fictional, or used in a fictional sense (e.g., there likely were real Dukes of Gloucester at various points in history, but I have no evidence to suggest that any of them were in fact kleptomaniac.).

Other useful references include:

ENGLISH SOCIETY IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY (from THE PELICAN SOCIAL HISTORY OF BRITAIN series), by Roy Porter, 1982, Pelican Books. ISBN 0-14-022099-2. This includes a good bibliography, plus a number of interesting statistical tables.

THE TRANSVESTITE MEMOIRS OF THE ABBÉ DE CHOISY, Peter Owen Publishers, London. ISBN 0-7206-0915-1. This book deals with the subject of the title, in seventeenth-century France, and is more interesting for the sumptuous details of the Abbé's clothes than anything else.

THE QUEER DUTCHMAN: True Account of a Sailor Castaway on a Desert Island for "Unnatural Acts" and Left to God's Mercy, by Peter Agnos, Green Eagle Press, New York, 1974, 1993, ISBN 0-914018-03-5. The (edited) journal of Jan Svilts, marooned on Ascension Island in 1725 by officers of the Dutch East India Company, who feared that his "unnatural acts" would bring down the wrath of God upon their venture, as upon the inhabitants of Sodom.

LOVE LETTERS BETWEEN A CERTAIN LATE NOBLEMAN AND THE FAMOUS MR. WILSON, Michael S. Kimmel, ed. Harrington Park Press, New York, 1990. (Originally published as *Journal of Homosexuality* Volume 19, Number 2, 1990.) This deals with the homosexual world in England (London specifically) during the 18th century, and contains quite an extensive annotated bibliography, as well as considerable commentary on the actual correspondence, which is included.

SAMUEL JOHNSON'S DICTIONARY. ISBN 1-929154-10-0. Various editions of this are available; a recent abridged version is done by the Levenger Press, edited by Jack Lynch. The original dictionary was published in 1755.

A CLASSICAL DICTIONARY OF THE VULGAR TONGUE, by Captain Francis Grose (edited with a biographical and critical sketch and an extensive commentary by Eric Partridge). Routledge and Kegan Paul, London. There are several different editions available of Grose's original work (which the Captain himself revised and re-published several times), but the original was probably published around 1807.

DRESS IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY EUROPE 1715–1789, by Aileen Ribeiro, Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., New York, 1984. Well illustrated, with an abundance of paintings and drawings from the period, and several useful appendices on eighteenth-century currency and political events.

Greenwood's Map of London, 1827. This is the oldest complete map of London I was able to find, so I have used it as a general basis for the locations described. It's available at a number of Internet sites; I used the site maintained by the University of Bath Spa: http://users.bathspa.ac.uk/imagemap/html.

The Malaria Cure. Finbar Scanlon's notion of deliberately infecting someone with malaria in order to cure syphilis was a known medical procedure of the period—though not nearly so common or popular as the various mecury-based "cures."

Oddly enough, in very recent times, a few observations have been made of people suffering from chronic infective diseases, who then acquire a separate infection causing extremely high fever (in excess of 104 degrees) over a prolonged period. Such fevers are very dangerous in and of themselves, but what was remarkable was that those patients who survived such fevers were in many cases found to no longer have the chronic disease. So there is indeed some evidence—though still very anecdotal at this point—to suggest that Mr. Scanlon's remedy might well have worked. For the sake of Joseph Trevelyan and Maria Mayrhofer, we'll hope so!

Transvestite. The use of this word as a noun dates only from the mid-twentieth century. The

practice, however, is plainly a great deal older. Given Lord John's Latin education, the use of this Latinate construction as an adjective—"transvestite commerce"—is more than reasonable.

To Margaret Scott Gabaldon and Kay Fears Watkins, my children's wonderful grandmothers

Acknowledgments

Interviewers are always asking me how many research assistants I employ. The answer is "None." I do all my own research—because I simply wouldn't have any idea what to tell an assistant to go look for!

However, the answer also is "Hundreds!"—because so many nice people not only answer my random inquiries about this, that, and the other—but then helpfully provide lots more entertaining information that I would never have dreamed of asking for in the first place.

In conjunction with this particular book, I'd especially like to acknowledge the efforts of ...

... Karen Watson, of Her Majesty's Customs and Excise, who kindly spent a lot of time sleuthing round London (and assorted historical records) to verify the feasibility of various of Lord John's movements, and also was of invaluable assistance in locating appropriate venues for skulduggery, as well as suggesting picturesque bits of arcana like the heroically amended statue of Charles I. I have taken small liberties with some of her information regarding London police jurisdictions, but that's my fault, not hers.

... John L. Myers, who inadvertently started this a long time ago, by sending me books about queer Dutchmen and Englishmen who were a little odd, too.

... Laura Bailey (and her fellow re-enactors), for the lavish details of costume in the eighteenth century.

... Elaine Wilkinson, who not only responded to my plea for a "German red," but discovered the existence of Castle Georgen and the family zu Egkh und Hungerbach (Josef, his castle, and his Schilcher wine are real; his disreputable nephew is my own invention.

"Schilcher," by the way, means "brilliant" or "sparkling").

... Barbara Schnell, my wonderful German translator, for helpful details regarding the conversation and conduct of Stephan von Namtzen, and for the name "Mayrhofer," as well as the German expression for "well-groomed."

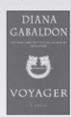
... My two literary agents, Russell Galen and Danny Baror, who, when I told them I had finished the second Lord John short story, inquired how long it was. Upon being told, they looked at each other, then at me, and said as one, "You *do* realize that that's the length most *normal* books are?" Which is why this is a book, though I make no claims for how normal it is. Not very, I expect.

Also by Diana Gabaldon

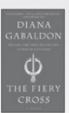
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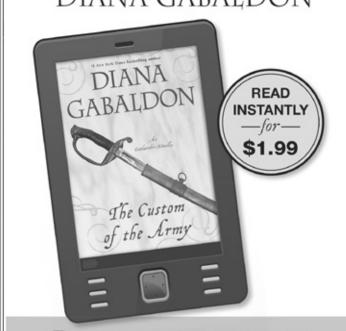
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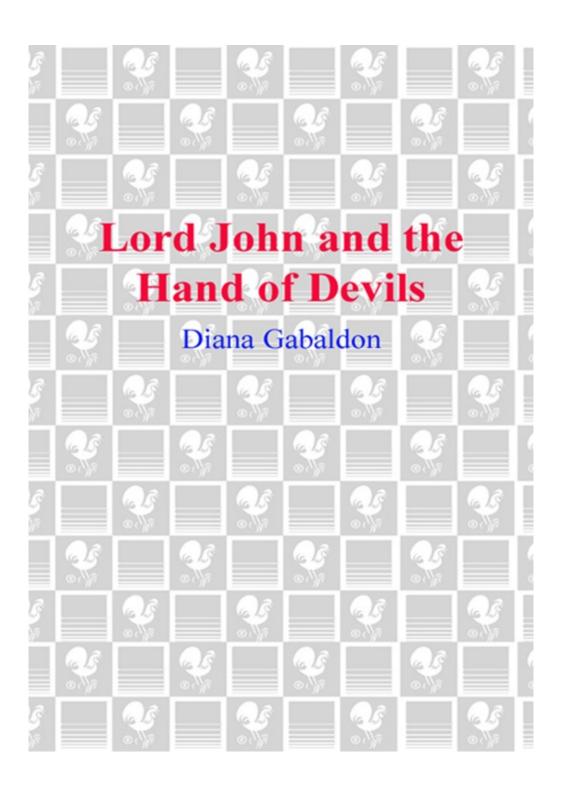
The Custom of the Army

An Outlander Novella

By #1 New York Times bestselling author DIANA GABALDON



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LORD JOHN

and the

Hand of Devils



DIANA GABALDON

DELACORTE PRESS

LORD JOHN AND THE HAND OF DEVILS A Delacorte Press Book / December 2007

Published by Bantam Dell A Division of Random House, Inc. New York, New York

Lord John and the Hellfire Club first appeared with Lord John and the Private Matter in October 2003.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data Gabaldon, Diana.

Lord John and the hand of devils / Diana Gabaldon.

p. cm.

A collection of three novellas.

1. Nobility—England—Fiction. 2. Seven Years' War, 1756–1763—Fiction.

I. Title.

PS3557.A22L665 2007 813'.54—dc22 2007024519

www.bantamdell.com

eISBN: 978-0-440-33729-4 v3.0_r4

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Foreword



In which we find A PUBLISHING HISTORY, BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION, AN AUTHOR'S NOTE, and A WARNING TO THE READER

Dear Reader—

PRELIMINARY WARNINGS

- 1. The book you are holding is not a novel; it's a collection of three separate novellas.
- 2. The novellas in this collection all feature Lord John Grey, not Jamie and Claire Fraser (though both are mentioned now and again), but
- 3. I did want to assure you all that there *is* another Jamie and Claire book to follow *A Breath of Snow and Ashes*. I usually work on more than one book at a time, and have been working on that one, too. It's just that this one is shorter, and therefore got finished first.

Awright. Now, for those of you still with me ...

Lord John Grey has been largely accidental, since the day he rashly decided to try to kill a notorious Jacobite in the darkness of the Carryarrick Pass. His association with Jamie and Claire Fraser (and with me) dates back to that passage in *Dragonfly in Amber*. While he did have small but important parts to play in subsequent books of the Outlander series, I really didn't intend to write books about him on his own. (On the other hand, I never intended to show Outlander to anybody, either, and here we are. You never know, that's all I can

say.)

Lord John began his independent life apart from the Outlander books when a British editor and anthologist named Maxim Jakubowski invited me to write a short story for an anthology of historical crime that he was putting together in honor of the novelist Ellis Peters, who had recently died. Now, I had never written a short story—barring things required for English classes in school, which tended to be pretty lame—but I was fond of Ellis Peters's Brother Cadfael mysteries, and I thought it would be an interesting technical challenge to see whether I could write something shorter than 300,000 words, so ... "Why not?" I said.

It had to be the eighteenth century, because that's the only period I know well, and I hadn't time to research another time adequately, just for a short story. And it couldn't involve the main characters from the Outlander series, because a good short story has high moral stakes, just as a novel does; thus, it would be difficult to write a short story involving the Frasers that would not include an event significant enough to have an impact on the plot of future novels involving them. Since I don't think up plots in advance, I thought I'd just avoid the whole problem by using Lord John; he's a very interesting character, he talks to me easily, and he appears only intermittently in the Outlander novels; no reason why he couldn't be having interesting adventures offstage, on his own time.

Enter Sir Francis Dashwood and his notorious Hellfire Club, plus the murder of a red-haired man, and Lord John made his first solo appearance in a short story titled "Hellfire," which was published in 1998 in the anthology *Past Poisons*, edited by Maxim Jakubowski, and published by Headline.

The stories for this anthology had a limit of 10,000 words. "Hellfire" was a hair over 12,000, but luckily nobody complained. I thought the ending was a bit rushed, even so—and so later rewrote the ending, expanding it slightly. Things turn out the same way, but with a little more style and elegance, I hope.

"Hellfire" has had an interesting publishing history, since that first appearance in *Past Poisons*. That anthology went out of print within a couple of years (it's since been reprinted), which is the point at which U.S. audiences began to hear about "Hellfire" and to express interest in Lord John's solo adventure. Unfortunately, there's really nothing you can *do* with a 14,000-word short story; it's too long for magazine markets, much too short to be published alone.

At this fortuitous point, a couple of online acquaintances of mine decided to start an e-publishing business, and asked me whether I had "a boxful of old short stories under the bed" (Why do people think every writer begins with short stories? Or if so, that they would be willing to expose this juvenilia to the world?) that they might be able to publish.

"What the heck?" I said, figuring this was as good an opportunity as any to explore the brave new world of e-publishing. In addition to my friends' business, the e-publishing arm of my German publishing company also decided to offer an electronic German version of "Hellfire," and so Lord John ventured out into international cyberspace.

This was an interesting experience, and fairly successful in e-publishing terms ("success" in e-publishing terms does not generally mean quitting your day job, let's put it like that). That experiment ended when my friends decided to list all their titles with Amazon.com—a very reasonable decision—but informed me that owing to the Amazon.com discount required of publishers, they would have to sell "Hellfire" at \$6.50, in order to make any money. I couldn't countenance the notion of selling a 23-page short story for six dollars and fifty cents, so we cordially parted ways at that point.

At this point, I began to think what else might be done with the story. It occurred to me that I'd enjoyed writing it—I like Lord John, and the complexities of his private life tend to lead him into Interesting Situations—and what if I were to write two or three more short stories involving him? Then all the short pieces could be published together in book form, and everybody would be happy. (Well, Lord John and I would, at least.)

"Hellfire" next saw print—retitled as "Lord John and the Hellfire Club"—as an add-in to the trade-paperback edition of the first Lord John Grey novel, *Lord John and the Private Matter*.

And here it is *again*, at last in book form, in company with two novellas: "Lord John and the Succubus," which was originally written for another anthology; and "Lord John and the Haunted Soldier," written specifically for this collection.

Other accidents happened—his lordship is prone to such things, I'm afraid—and I wrote *Lord John and the Private Matter*, under the delusion that this was in fact the second Lord John short story. I was informed by my literary agents, though, that in fact, I had inadvertently written a novel. (Well, how would I know? To me, a

novel is just getting *started* at 85,000 words.) This was good, insofar as my assorted publishers were ecstatic at the revelation that I actually *could* write a "normal"-sized novel, and promptly gave me a contract for two more Lord John Grey novels—but it still left "Hellfire" sitting there by itself at 14,000 words.

But accidents continued to happen: I was invited to write a novella for a fantasy anthology, and presto! We had "Lord John and the Succubus," which came in around 33,000 words. This meant that one more novella of that length or more, and we'd have critical mass.

Here, things got slightly tricky, though. By sheer happenstance, the short Lord John pieces alternated with the full-length novel: "Hellfire," *Private Matter*, "Succubus." And I had embarked on the second novel, *Lord John and the Brotherhood of the Blade*. All fine—but the German publisher, anxious to have the collection, asked whether I might be able to hurry up and write the final novella before finishing the second novel. Easygoing sort that I am, I said I reckoned I could do that—and I did. Allow me to note that writing a novella that follows a novel that isn't yet written is not the easiest thing in the world, but if I wanted an easy life, I suppose I'd clean swimming pools for a living.

This collection was originally to have been titled *Lord John and a Whiff of Brimstone* (because of the supernatural aspect common to all the stories), but the German publisher explained that they couldn't use that title, because my most recent Outlander novel, *A Breath of Snow and Ashes*, is titled *Ein Hauch von Schnee und Asche* in German—and German does not have separate words for "breath" and "whiff"—ergo, they'd have another *Ein Hauch* ... and they thought one was plenty. They suggested instead, *Lord John and the Hand of Devils*, which I thought was wonderful, and immediately took for the Englishlanguage volume as well.

I hope you'll enjoy it!

Best wishes,

Diana Gabaldon



LORD JOHN

and the Hellfire Club



Part I



A Red-Haired Man

London, 1756 The Society for Appreciation of the English Beefsteak, a gentleman's club

Lord John Grey jerked his eyes away from the door. No. No, he mustn't turn and stare. Needing some other focus for his gaze, he fixed his eyes instead on Quarry's scar.

"A glass with you, sir?" Scarcely waiting for the club's steward to provide for his companion, Harry Quarry drained his cup of claret, then held it out for more. "And another, perhaps, in honor of your return from frozen exile?" Quarry grinned broadly, the scar pulling down the corner of his eye in a lewd wink as he did so, and lifted up his glass again.

Lord John tilted his own cup in acceptance of the salute, but barely tasted the contents. With an effort, he kept his eyes on Quarry's face, willing himself not to turn and stare, not to gawk after the flash of fire in the corridor that had caught his eye.

Quarry's scar had faded; tightened and shrunk to a thin white slash, its nature made plain only by its position, angled hard across the ruddy cheek. It might otherwise have lost itself among the lines of hard living, but instead remained visible, the badge of honor that its owner so plainly considered it.

"You are exceeding kind to note my return, sir," Grey said. His heart hammered in his ears, muffling Quarry's words—no great loss to conversation.

It is not, his sensible mind pointed out, it cannot be. Yet sense had nothing to do with the riot of his sensibilities, that surge of feeling that seized him by nape and buttocks, as though it would pluck him up and turn him forcibly to go in pursuit of the red-haired man he had so briefly glimpsed.

Quarry's elbow nudged him rudely, a not-unwelcome recall to

present circumstances.

"... among the ladies, eh?"
"Eh?"

"I say your return has been noted elsewhere, too. My sister-inlaw bid me send her regard and discover your present lodgings. Do you stay with the regiment?"

"No, I am at present at my mother's house, in Jermyn Street." Finding his cup still full, Grey raised it and drank deep. The Beefsteak's claret was of excellent vintage, but he scarcely noticed its bouquet. There were voices in the hall outside, raised in altercation.

"Ah. I'll inform her, then; expect an invitation by the morning post. Lucinda has her eye upon you for a cousin of hers, I daresay—she has a flock of poor but well-favored female relations, whom she means to shepherd to good marriages." Quarry's teeth showed briefly. "Be warned."

Grey nodded politely. He was accustomed to such overtures. The youngest of four brothers, he had no hopes of a title, but the family name was ancient and honorable, his person and countenance not without appeal—and he had no need of an heiress, his own means being ample.

The door flung open, sending such a draft across the room as made the fire in the hearth roar up like the flames of Hades, scattering sparks across the Turkey carpet. Grey gave thanks for the burst of heat; it gave excuse for the color that he felt suffuse his cheeks.

Nothing like. Of course he is nothing like. Who could be? And yet the emotion that filled his breast was as much disappointment as relief.

The man was tall, yes, but not strikingly so. Slight of build, almost delicate. And young, younger than Grey, he judged. But the hair—yes, the hair was very like.



"Lord John Grey." Quarry had intercepted the young man, a hand on his sleeve, turning him for introduction. "Allow me to acquaint you with my cousin by marriage, Mr. Robert Gerald."

Mr. Gerald nodded shortly, then seemed to take hold of himself. Suppressing whatever it was that had caused the blood to rise under his fair skin, he bowed, then fixed his gaze on Grey in cordial

acknowledgment.

"Your servant, sir."

"And yours." Not copper, not carrot; a deep red, almost rufous, with glints and streaks of cinnabar and gold. The eyes were not blue—thank God!—but rather a soft and luminous brown.

Grey's mouth had gone dry. To his relief, Quarry offered refreshment, and upon Gerald's agreement, snapped his fingers for the steward and steered the three of them to an armchaired corner, where the haze of tobacco smoke hung like a sheltering curtain over the less-convivial members of the Beefsteak.

"Who was that I heard in the corridor?" Quarry demanded, as soon as they were settled. "Bubb-Dodington, surely? The man's a voice like a costermonger."

"I—he—yes, it was." Mr. Gerald's pale skin, not quite recovered from its earlier excitement, bloomed afresh, to Quarry's evident amusement.

"Oho! And what perfidious proposal has he made you, young Bob?"

"Nothing. He—an invitation I did not wish to accept, that is all. Must you shout so loudly, Harry?" It was chilly at this end of the room, but Grey thought he could warm his hands at the fire of Gerald's smooth cheeks.

Quarry snorted with amusement, looking around at the nearby chairs.

"Who's to hear? Old Cotterill's deaf as a post, and the General's half dead. And why do you care in any case, if the matter's so innocent as you suggest?" Quarry's eyes swiveled to bear on his cousin by marriage, suddenly intelligent and penetrating.

"I did not say it was innocent," Gerald replied dryly, regaining his composure. "I said I declined to accept it. And that, Harry, is all you will hear of it, so desist this piercing glare you turn upon me. It may work on your subalterns, but not on me."

Grey laughed, and after a moment, Quarry joined in. He clapped Gerald on the shoulder, eyes twinkling.

"My cousin is the soul of discretion, Lord John. But that's as it should be, eh?"

"I have the honor to serve as junior secretary to the prime minister," Gerald explained, seeing incomprehension on Grey's features. "While the secrets of government are dull indeed, at least by Harry's standards"—he shot his cousin a malicious grin—"they are not mine to share."

"Oh, well, of no interest to Lord John in any case," Quarry said philosophically, tossing back his third glass of aged claret with a disrespectful haste more suited to porter. Grey saw the senior steward close his eyes in quiet horror at the act of desecration, and smiled to himself—or so he thought, until he caught Mr. Gerald's soft brown eyes upon him, a matching smile of complicity upon his lips.

"Such things are of little interest to anyone save those most intimately concerned," Gerald said, still smiling at Grey. "The fiercest battles fought are those where very little lies at stake, you know. But what interests you, Lord John, if politics does not?"

"Not lack of interest," Grey responded, holding Robert Gerald's eyes boldly with his. *No, not lack of interest at all.* "Ignorance, rather. I have been absent from London for some time; in fact, I have quite lost ... touch."

Without intent, one hand closed upon his glass, the thumb drawing slowly upward, stroking the smooth, cool surface as though it were another's flesh. Hastily, he set the glass down, seeing as he did so the flash of blue from the sapphire ring he wore. It might have been a lighthouse beacon, he reflected wryly, warning of rough seas ahead.

And yet the conversation sailed smoothly on, despite Quarry's jocular inquisitions regarding Grey's most recent posting in the wilds of Scotland and his speculations as to his brother officer's future prospects. As the former was *terra prohibita* and the latter *terra incognita*, Grey had little to say in response, and the talk moved on to other things: horses, dogs, regimental gossip, and other such comfortable masculine fare.

Yet now and again, Grey felt the brown eyes rest on him, with an expression of speculation that both modesty and caution forbade him to interpret. It was with no sense of surprise, though, that upon departure from the club, he found himself alone in the vestibule with Gerald, Quarry having been detained by an acquaintance met in passing.

"I impose intolerably, sir," Gerald said, moving close enough to keep his low-voiced words from the ears of the servant who kept the door. "I would ask your favor, though, if it be not entirely unwelcome?"

"I am completely at your command, I do assure you," Grey said, feeling the warmth of claret in his blood succeeded by a rush of deeper heat.

"I wish—that is, I am in some doubt regarding a circumstance of

which I have become aware. Since you are so recently come to London—that is, you have the advantage of perspective, which I must necessarily lack by reason of familiarity. There is no one ..." He fumbled for words, then turned eyes grown suddenly and deeply unhappy on Lord John. "I can confide in no one!" he said, in a sudden, passionate whisper. He gripped Lord John's arm, with surprising strength. "It may be nothing, nothing at all. But I must have help."

"You shall have it, if it be in my power to give." Grey's fingers touched the hand that grasped his arm; Gerald's fingers were cold. Quarry's voice echoed down the corridor behind them, loud with joviality.

"The 'Change, near the Arcade," Gerald said rapidly. "Tonight, just after full dark." The grip on Grey's arm was gone, and Gerald vanished, the soft fall of his hair vivid against his blue cloak.



Grey's afternoon was spent in necessary errands to tailors and solicitors, then in making courtesy calls upon long-neglected acquaintance, in an effort to fill the empty hours that loomed before dark. Quarry, at loose ends, had volunteered to accompany him, and Lord John had made no demur. Bluff and jovial by temper, Quarry's conversation was limited to cards, drink, and whores. He and Grey had little in common, save the regiment. And Ardsmuir.

When he had first seen Quarry again at the club, he had thought to avoid the man, feeling that memory was best buried. And yet ... could memory be truly buried, when its embodiment still lived? He might forget a dead man, but not one merely absent. And the flames of Robert Gerald's hair had kindled embers he had thought safely smothered.

It might be unwise to feed that spark, he thought, freeing his soldier's cloak from the grasp of an importunate beggar. Open flames were dangerous, and he knew that as well as any man. And yet ... hours of buffeting through London's crowds and hours more of enforced sociality had filled him with such unexpected longing for the quiet of the North that he found himself filled suddenly with the desire to speak of Scotland, if nothing more.

They had passed the Royal Exchange in the course of their errands; he had glanced covertly toward the Arcade, with its gaudy paint and tattered posters, its tawdry crowds of hawkers and strollers, and felt a soft spasm of anticipation. It was autumn; the dark came early.

They were near the river now; the noise of clamoring cockle-sellers and fishmongers rang in the winding alleys, and a cold wind filled with the invigorating stench of tar and wood shavings bellied out their cloaks like sails. Quarry turned and waved above the heads of the intervening throng, gesturing toward a coffeehouse; Grey nodded in reply, lowered his head, and elbowed his way toward the door.

"Such a press," Lord John said, pushing his way after Quarry into the relative peace of the small, spice-scented room. He took off his tricorne and sat down, tenderly adjusting the red cockade, knocked askew by contact with the populace. Slightly shorter than the common height, Grey found himself at a disadvantage in crowds.

"I had forgot what a seething anthill London is." He took a deep breath; grasp the nettle, then, and get it over. "A contrast with Ardsmuir, to be sure."

"I'd forgot what a misbegotten lonely hellhole Scotland is," Quarry replied, "until you turned up at the Beefsteak this morning to remind me of my blessings. Here's to anthills!" He lifted the steaming glass which had appeared as by magic at his elbow, and bowed ceremoniously to Grey. He drank, and shuddered, either in memory of Scotland or in answer to the quality of the coffee. He frowned, and reached for the sugar bowl.

"Thank God we're both well out of it. Freezing your arse off indoors or out, and the blasted rain coming in at every crack and window." Quarry took off his wig and scratched his balding pate, quite without self-consciousness, then clapped it on again.

"No society but the damned dour-faced Scots, either; never had a whore there who didn't give me the feeling she'd as soon cut it off as serve it. I swear I'd have put a pistol to my head in another month had you not come to relieve me, Grey. What poor bugger took over from you?"

"No one." Grey scratched at his own fair hair abstractedly, infected by Quarry's itch. He glanced outside; the street was still jammed, but the crowd's noise was mercifully muffled by the leaded glass. One sedan chair had run into another, its bearers knocked off balance by the crowd. "Ardsmuir is no longer a prison; the prisoners were transported." "Transported?" Quarry pursed his lips in surprise, then sipped, more cautiously. "Well, and serve them right, the miserable whoresons. Hmm!" He grunted, and shook his head over the coffee. "No more than most deserve. A shame for Fraser, though—you recall a man named Fraser, big red-haired fellow? One of the Jacobite officers—a gentleman. Quite liked him," Quarry said, his roughly cheerful countenance sobering slightly. "Too bad. Did you find occasion to speak with him?"

"Now and then." Grey felt a familiar clench of his innards, and turned away, lest anything show on his face. Both sedan chairs were down now, the bearers shouting and shoving. The street was narrow to begin with, clogged with the normal traffic of tradesmen and 'prentices; customers stopping to watch the altercation added to the impassibility.

"You knew him well?" He could not help himself; whether it brought him comfort or misery, he felt he had no choice now but to speak of Fraser—and Quarry was the only man in London to whom he could so speak.

"Oh, yes—or as well as one might know a man in that situation," Quarry replied offhandedly. "Had him to dine in my quarters every week; very civil in his speech, good hand at cards." He lifted a fleshy nose from his glass, cheeks flushed ruddier than usual with the steam. "He wasn't one to invite pity, of course, but one could scarce help but feel some sympathy for his circumstances."

"Sympathy? And yet you left him in chains."

Quarry looked up sharply, catching the edge in Grey's words.

"I may have liked the man; I didn't trust him. Not after what happened to one of my sergeants."

"And what was that?" Lord John managed to infuse the question with no more than light interest.

"Misadventure. Drowned by accident in the stone-quarry pool," Quarry said, dumping several teaspoons of rock sugar into a fresh glass and stirring vigorously. "Or so I wrote in the report." He looked up from his coffee, and gave Grey his lewd, lopsided wink. "I liked Fraser. Didn't care for the sergeant. But never think a man is helpless, Grey, only because he's fettered."

Grey sought urgently for a way to inquire further without letting his passionate interest be seen.

"So you believe—" he began.

"Look," said Quarry, rising suddenly from his seat. "Look! Damned

if it's not Bob Gerald!"

Lord John whipped round in his chair. Sure enough, the lateafternoon sun struck sparks from a fiery head, bent as its owner emerged from one of the stalled sedan chairs. Gerald straightened, face set in a puzzled frown, and began to push his way into the knot of embattled bearers.

"Whatever is he about, I wonder? Surely—Hi! Hold! Hold, you blackguard!" Dropping his glass unregarded, Quarry rushed toward the door, bellowing.

Grey, a step or two behind, saw no more than the flash of metal in the sun and the brief look of startlement on Gerald's face. Then the crowd fell back, with a massed cry of horror, and his view was obscured by a throng of heaving backs.

He fought his way through the screaming mob without compunction, striking ruthlessly with his sword hilt to clear the way.

Gerald was lying in the arms of one of his bearers, hair fallen forward, hiding his face. The young man's knees were drawn up in agony, balled fists pressed hard against the growing stain on his waistcoat.

Quarry was there; he brandished his sword at the crowd, bellowing threats to keep them back, then glared wildly round for a foe to skewer.

"Who?" he shouted at the bearers, face congested with fury. "Who's done this?"

The circle of white faces turned in helpless question, one to another, but found no focus; the foe had fled, and his bearers with him.

Grey knelt in the gutter, careless of filth, and smoothed back the ruddy hair with hands gone stiff and cold. The hot stink of blood was thick in the air, and the fecal smell of pierced intestine. Grey had seen battlefields enough to know the truth even before he saw the glazing eyes, the pallid face. He felt a deep, sharp stab at the sight, as though his own guts were pierced, as well.

Brown eyes fixed wide on his, a spark of recognition deep behind the shock and pain. He seized the dying man's hand in his, and chafed it, knowing the futility of the gesture. Gerald's mouth worked, soundless. A bubble of red spittle swelled at the corner of his lips.

"Tell me." Grey bent urgently to the man's ear, and felt the soft brush of hair against his mouth. "Tell me who has done it—I will avenge you. I swear it."

He felt a slight spasm of the fingers in his, and squeezed back, hard,

as though he might force some of his own strength into Gerald; enough for a word, a name.

The soft lips were blanched, the blood bubble growing. Gerald drew back the corners of his mouth, a fierce, tooth-baring rictus that burst the bubble and sent a spray of blood across Grey's cheek. Then the lips drew in, pursing in what might have been the invitation to a kiss. Then he died, and the wide brown eyes went blank.

Quarry was shouting at the bearers, demanding information. More shouts echoed down the walls of the streets, the nearby alleys, news flying from the scene of murder like bats out of hell.

Grey knelt alone in the silence near the dead man, in the stench of blood and voided bowels. Gently, he laid Gerald's hand limp across his wounded breast, and wiped the blood from his own hand, unthinking, on his cloak.

A motion drew his eye. Harry Quarry knelt on the other side of the body, his face gone white as the scar on his cheek, prying open a large clasp knife. He searched gently through Gerald's loosened, bloodmatted hair, and drew out a clean lock, which he cut off. The sun was setting; light caught the hair as it fell, a curl of vivid flame.

"For his mother," Quarry explained. Lips tightly pressed together, he coiled the gleaming strand and put it carefully away.

Part II



Intrigue

The invitation came two days later, and with it a note from Harry Quarry. Lord John Grey was bidden to an evening's entertainment at Joffrey House, by desire of the Lady Lucinda Joffrey. Quarry's note said simply, *Come. I have news*.

And not beforetimes, Grey thought, tossing the note aside. The two days since Gerald's death had been filled with frantic activity, with inquiry and speculation—to no avail. Every shop and barrow in Forby Street had been turned over thoroughly, but no trace found of the assailant or his minions; they had faded into the crowd, anonymous as ants.

That proved one thing, at least, Grey thought. It was a planned attack, not a random piece of street violence. For the assailant to vanish so quickly, he must have looked like hoi polloi; a prosperous merchant or a noble would have stood out by his bearing and the manner of his dress. The sedan chair had been hired; no one recalled the appearance of the hirer, and the name given was—not surprisingly—false.

He shuffled restlessly through the rest of the mail. All other avenues of inquiry had proven fruitless so far. No weapon had been found. He and Quarry had sought the hall porter at the Beefsteak, in hopes that the man had heard somewhat of the conversation between Gerald and Bubb-Dodington, but the man was a temporary servant, hired for the day, and had since taken his wages and vanished, no doubt to drink them.

Grey had canvassed his acquaintance for any rumor of enemies, or failing that, for any history of the late Robert Gerald that might bear a hint of motive for the crime. Gerald was evidently known, in a modest way, in government circles and the venues of respectable society, but he had no great money to leave, no heirs save his mother, no hint of any romantic entanglement—in short, there was no intimation whatever of an association that might have led to that bloody death in

Forby Street.

He paused, eye caught by an unfamiliar seal. A note, signed by one G. Bubb-Dodington, requesting a few moments of his time, in a convenient season—and noting *en passant* that B-D would himself be present at Joffrey House that evening, should Lord John find himself likewise engaged.

He picked up Quarry's note again, and found another sheet of paper folded up behind it. Unfolded, this proved to be a broadsheet, printed with a poem—or at the least, words arranged in the form of verse. "A Blot Removed," it was titled. Lacking in meter, but not in crude wit, the doggerel gave the story of a "he-whore" whose lewdities outraged the public, until "scandal flamed up, blood-red as the abominable color of his hair," and an unknown savior rose up to destroy the perverse, thus wiping clean the pristine parchment of society.

Lord John had eaten no breakfast, and sight of this extinguished what vestiges he had of appetite. He carried the document into the morning room, and fed it carefully to the fire.



Joffrey House was a small but elegant white stone mansion, just off Eaton Square. Grey had never come there before, but the house was well known for brilliant parties, much frequented by those with a taste for politics; Sir Richard Joffrey, Quarry's elder half brother, was influential.

As Grey came up the marble steps, he saw a member of Parliament and the First Sea Lord, close in converse ahead of him, and perceived a considerable array of discreetly elegant carriages standing at a distance in the street. Something of an occasion, then; he was a trifle surprised that Lady Lucinda should be entertaining on such a scale, on the heels of her cousin's assassination—Quarry had said she was close to Gerald.

Quarry was on the *qui vive*; Grey had no sooner been announced than he found himself seized by the arm and drawn out of the slowly moving reception line, into the shelter of a monstrous plant that had been stood in the corner of the ballroom, where it consorted with several of its fellows in the manner of a small jungle.

"You came, then," Quarry said, unnecessarily.

Seeing the haggard aspect of the man, Grey said merely, "Yes. What news?"

Fatigue and distress tended merely to sharpen Grey's fine-cut features, but gave Quarry an air of snappish ferocity, making him look like a large, ill-tempered dog.

"You saw that—that—unspeakable piece of excrement?"

"The broadsheet? Yes; where did you get it?"

"They are all over London; not only that particular excrescence—many others, as vile or worse."

Grey felt a prick of deep unease.

"With similar accusations?"

"That Robert Gerald was a pederast? Yes, and worse; that he was a member of a notorious sodomitical society, a gathering for the purpose of ... well, you'll know the sort of thing? Disgusting!"

Grey could not tell whether this last epithet was applied to the existence of such societies, or to the association of Gerald's name with one. In consequence, he chose his words with care.

"Yes, I have heard of such associations."

Grey did know, though the knowledge was not personal; such societies were said to be common—he knew of taverns and back rooms aplenty, to say nothing of the more notorious mollyhouses, where ... Still, fastidiousness and caution had prevented any close inquiry into these assemblies.

"Need I say that—that such accusations have no truth—not the slightest pretention to truth?" Quarry spoke with some difficulty, avoiding Grey's eye. Grey laid a hand on Quarry's sleeve.

"No, you need not say so. I am certain of it," he said quietly. Quarry glanced up, giving him a half-embarrassed smile, and clasped his hand briefly.

"Thank you," he said, voice rasping.

"But if it be not so," Grey observed, giving Quarry time to recover himself, "then such rapid profusion of rumor has the taste about it of an organized calumny. And that in itself is very strange, do you not think?"

Evidently not; Quarry looked blankly at him.

"Someone wished not only to destroy Robert Gerald," Grey explained, "but thought it necessary also to blacken his name. Why? The man is dead; who would think it needful to murder his reputation, as well?"

Quarry looked startled, then frowned, brows drawing close together

in the effort of thought.

"'Strewth," he said slowly. "Damme, you're right. But who ...?" He stopped, looking thoughtfully out over the assemblage of guests.

"Is the prime minister here?" Grey peered through the drooping foliage. It was a small but brilliant party, and one of a particular kind; no more than forty guests, and these all drawn from the echelons of power. No mincing fops or gadding henwits; ladies there were, to be sure, providing grace and beauty—but it was the men who were of consequence. Several ministers were in attendance, the sea lord, an assistant minister of finance ... He stopped, feeling as though someone had just punched him hard in the belly.

Quarry was muttering in his ear, explaining something about the prime minister's absence, but Grey was no longer attending. He fought the urge to step back farther into the shadows.

George Everett was looking well—very well indeed. Wig and powder set off the blackness of his brows and the fine dark eyes below them. A firm chin and a long, mobile mouth—Grey's index finger twitched involuntarily, tracing the line of it in memory.

"Are you well, Grey?" Quarry's gruff voice recalled him to himself.

"Yes. A trifling indisposition, no more." Grey pulled his eyes away from Everett's slim figure, striking in black and primrose. It was only a matter of time, after all; he had known they would meet again—and at least he had not been taken unawares. With an effort, he turned his attention back to Quarry.

"The news you mentioned. Is it—"

Quarry interrupted, gripping his arm and pulling him out from the shelter of the trees into the babble of the party.

"Hark, here is Lucinda. Come, she wishes to meet you."

Lady Lucinda Joffrey was small and round, her dark hair worn unpowdered, sleek to the skull, and her ringlets fastened with an ornament of pheasant's feathers that went well with her russet gown. Her face was plump and rather plain, though it might have some claim to character, had there been much life to it. Instead, swollen lids drooped over eyes smudged with shadows she had not bothered to disguise.

Lord John bowed over her hand, wondering again as he did so what had caused her to open her house this evening; plainly she was in great distress.

"My lord," she murmured, in response to his courtesies. Then she lifted her eyes and he found himself startled. Her eyes were beautiful,

almond-shaped and clear gray in color—and despite their reddened lids, clear and piercing with intelligence.

"Harry tells me that you were with Robert when he died," she said, softly but clearly, holding him with those eyes. "And that you have offered your help in finding the dastard who has done this thing."

"Indeed. I offer you my most sincere condolences, my lady."

"I thank you, sir." She nodded toward the room, bright with guests and blazing candles. "You will find it strange, no doubt, that we should revel in such fashion, and my cousin so recently and despicably slain?" Grey began to make the expected demur, but she would not allow it, going on before he could speak.

"It was my husband's wish. He said we must—that to shrink and cower before such slander would be to grant it credence. He insisted that we must meet it boldly, or suffer ourselves from the stain of scandal." Her lips pressed tight, a handkerchief crumpled in her hand, but no tears welled in the gray eyes.

"Your husband is wise." That was a thought; Sir Richard Joffrey was an influential member of Parliament, with a shrewd appreciation of politics, a great acquaintance with those in power—and the money to influence them. Could the killing of Gerald and this posthumous effort to discredit him be in some way a blow at Sir Richard?

Grey hesitated; he had not yet told Quarry of Gerald's request at the club. *There is no one I can confide in*, Gerald had said—and presumably included his cousin by marriage therein. But Gerald was dead, and Grey's obligation was now vengeance, not confidence. The musicians had paused; with a tilt of the head, Grey drew his companions back into the privacy of the jungle.

"Madam, I had the honor of a very brief acquaintance with your cousin. Still, when I met him ..." In a few words, he acquainted his hearers with Robert Gerald's last request.

"Does either of you know what his concern might have been?" Grey asked, looking from one to the other. The musicians were starting up, the strains of fiddle and flute rising above the rumble of conversation.

"He asked you to meet him on the 'Change?" A shadow passed over Quarry's face. If Gropecunt Street was the main thoroughfare for female prostitution, the Royal Exchange was its male counter-part—after dark, at least.

"That means nothing, Harry," Lucinda said. Her grief had been subsumed by interest, plump figure drawn erect. "The 'Change is a meeting place for every kind of intrigue. I am sure Robert's choice of meeting place had nothing to do with—with these scurrilous accusations." Lady Lucinda frowned. "But I know of nothing that would have caused my cousin such concern—do you, Harry?"

"If I did, I would have said so," Quarry said irritably. "Since he did not think me fit to confide in, though—"

"You mentioned some news," Grey interrupted, seeking to avert acrimony. "What was that?"

"Oh." Quarry stopped, irritation fading. "I've gleaned a notion of what Bubb-Dodington's invitation consisted." Quarry cast a glance of unconcealed dislike toward a knot of men gathered talking at the opposite side of the room. "And if my informant be correct, 'twas far from innocent."

"Which is Bubb-Dodington? Is he here?"

"Indeed." Lucinda pointed with her fan. "Standing by the hearth—in the reddish suit."

Grey squinted through the haze of hearth smoke and candle glow, picking out a slender figure in bagwig and rose velvet—fashionable, to be sure, but seeming somehow slightly fawning in attitude, as he leaned toward another of the group.

"I have inquired regarding him," Grey said. "I hear he is a political, but one of no great consequence; a mere time-server."

"True, he is nothing in himself. His associations, though, are more substantial. Those with whom he allies himself are scarcely without power, though not—not yet!—in control."

"And who are those? I am quite ignorant of politics these days."

"Sir Francis Dashwood, John Wilkes, Mr. Churchill ... Paul Whitehead, too. Oh, and Everett. You know George Everett?"

"We are acquainted," Grey said equably. "The invitation you mentioned ...?"

"Oh, yes." Quarry shook his head, recalled to himself. "I finally discovered the whereabouts of the hall porter. He had overheard enough of Bubb-Dodington's conversation to say that the man was urging Gerald to accept an invitation to stay at West Wycombe."

Quarry raised his brows high in implication, but Grey remained ignorant and said so.

"West Wycombe is the home of Sir Francis Dashwood," Lady Lucinda put in. "And the center of his influence. He entertains there lavishly, even as we do"—her plump mouth made a small moue of deprecation—"and to the same purposes."

"The seduction of the powerful?" Grey smiled. "So Bubb-Dodington

—or his masters—sought to entice Gerald? To what end, I wonder?"

"Richard calls the West Wycombe assemblage a nest of vipers," Lucinda said. "Bent upon achieving their ends by any means, even dishonorable ones. Perhaps they sought to lure Robert into their camp for the sake of his own virtues, or"—she paused, hesitant—"for the sake of what he might know regarding the prime minister's affairs?"

The music was starting afresh at the far end of the room, and they were interrupted at this delicate moment by a lady who, spotting them in their leafy refuge, came bustling in to claim Harry Quarry for a dance, waving aside all possibility of refusal with an airy fan.

"Is that not Lady Fitzwalter?" Buxom and high-colored, the lady now pressing Quarry's hand provocatively to her breast was the wife of Sir Hugh, an elderly baronet from Sussex. Quarry appeared to have no objections, following up Lady F's flirtations with a jocular pinch.

"Oh, Harry fancies himself a great rake," Lady Lucinda said tolerantly, "though anyone can see it comes to nothing more than a hand of cards in the gentlemen's clubs and an eye for shapely flesh. Is any officer in London greatly different?" A shrewd gray eye passed over Lord John, inquiring as to what his own differences might be.

"Indeed," he said, amused. "And yet he was sent to Scotland for some indiscretion, I collect. Was it not the incident that left him with that slash across the face?"

"Oh, la," she said, pursing up her mouth in scorn. "The famous scar! One would think it the Order of the Garter, he do flaunt it so. No, no, 'twas the cards that were the cause of his exile—he caught a Colonel of the regiment a-cheating at loo, and was too much gone in wine to keep a decent silence on the point."

Grey opened his mouth to inquire about the scar, but was silenced himself by her grip upon his sleeve.

"Now, there's a rake, if you want one," she said, low-voiced. Her eyes marked out a man across the room, near the hearth. "Dashwood; him Harry spoke of. Know of him, do you?"

Grey squinted against the haze of smoke in the room. The man was heavy-bodied, but betrayed no softness of flesh; the sloping shoulders were thick with muscle, and if waist and calves were thick as well, it was by a natural inclination of form, rather than the result of indulgence.

"I have heard the name," Grey said. "A political of some minor repute?"

"In the arena of politics, yes," Lady Lucinda agreed, not taking her

eyes from the man. "In others ... less minor. In fact, his repute in some circles is nothing short of outright notoriety."

A reach for a glass stretched the satin of Dashwood's broidered plum-silk waistcoat tight across a broad chest, and brought into view a face, likewise broad, ruddy in the candle glow and animated with a cynic laughter. He wore no wig, but had a quantity of dark hair, curling low across the brow. Grey furrowed his own brow in the effort of recall; someone had said something to him, yes—but the occasion escaped him, as did its content.

"He seems a man of substance," he hazarded. Certainly Dashwood was the cynosure of his end of the room, all eyes upon him as he spoke.

Lady Lucinda uttered a short laugh.

"Do you think so, sir? He and his friends flaunt their practice of licentiousness and blasphemy as Harry flaunts his scar—and from the same cause."

It was the word "blasphemy" that brought back recollection.

"Ha. I have heard mention ... Medmenham Abbey?"

Lucinda's lips pursed tight, and she nodded. "The Hellfire Club, they call it."

"Indeed. There have been Hellfire clubs before—many of them. Is this one more than the usual excuse for public riot and drunken license?"

She looked at the men before the fire, her countenance troubled. With the light of the blaze behind them, all individuality of lineament was lost; they appeared no more than an assemblage of dark figures; faceless devils, outlined by the firelight.

"I think not," she said, very low-voiced, glancing to and fro to assure they were unheard. "Or so I *did* think—until I heard of the invitation to Robert. Now ..."

The advent near the jungle of a tall, good-looking man whose resemblance to Quarry made his identity clear put an end to the clandestine conference.

"There is Sir Richard; he is looking for me." Poised to take flight, Lady Lucinda stopped and looked back at Grey. "I cannot say, sir, what reason you may have for your interest—but I do thank you for it." A flicker of wryness lit the gray eyes. "Godspeed you, sir—though for myself, I should not much respect a God so petty as to be concerned with such as Francis Dashwood."

Grey passed into the general crowd, bowing and smiling, allowing

himself to be drawn into a dance here, a conversation there; keeping all the time one eye upon the group near the hearth. Men joined it for a short time, fell away, and were replaced by others, yet the central group remained unchanged.

Bubb-Dodington and Dashwood were the center of it; Churchill, the poet John Wilkes, and the Earl of Sandwich surrounded them. Seeing at one point during a break in the music that a good many had gathered by the hearth, men and women alike, Grey thought the moment ripe to make his own presence known, and unobtrusively joined the crowd, maneuvering to a spot near Bubb-Dodington.

Mr. Justice Margrave was holding the floor, speaking of the subject which had formed the meat of most conversations Grey had heard so far—the death of Robert Gerald, or more particularly, the rash of rumor and scandal that followed it. The judge caught Grey's eye and nodded—his worship was well acquainted with Grey's family—but continued his denunciation unimpeded.

"I should wish that, rather than the pillory, the stake be the punishment for such abominable vice." Margrave swung a heavy head in Grey's direction, eyelids dropping half closed. "Have you read Holloway's notion, sir? He suggests that this disgusting practice of sodomy be restrained by castration or some other cogent preventative."

Grey restrained the urge to clasp himself protectively.

"Cogent, indeed," he said. "You suppose the man who cut down Robert Gerald to be impelled by moralistic motives, then?"

"Whether he were or no, I should say he has rendered signal service to society, ridding us of an exponent of this moral blight."

Grey observed Harry Quarry standing a yard away, gleaming eyes fixed upon the elderly justice in a manner calculated to cause the utmost concern for that worthy's future prospects. Turning away, lest his acknowledgment embolden Quarry to open violence, he found himself instead face to face with George Everett.

"John," Everett said softly, smiling.

"Mr. Everett." Grey inclined his head politely. Nothing squelched, Everett continued to smile. He was a handsome devil, and he knew it.

"You are in good looks, John. Exile agrees with you, it seems." The long mouth widened, curling at the corner.

"Indeed. I must take pains to go away more often, then." His heart was beating faster. Everett's perfume was his accustomed musk and myrrh; the scent of it conjured tumbled linens, and the touch of hard and knowing hands.

A hoarse voice near his shoulder provided welcome distraction.

"Lord John? Your servant, sir."

Grey turned to find the gentleman in rose velvet bowing to him, a look of spurious cordiality fixed upon saturnine features.

"Mr. Bubb-Dodington, I collect. I am obliged, sir." He bowed in turn, and allowed himself to be separated from Everett, who stood looking after them, a faint smile upon his lips.

So conscious was he of Everett's eyes burning holes in his back that he scarce attended to Bubb-Dodington's overtures, replying automatically to the man's courtesies and inquiries. It was not until the rasping voice mentioned the word "Medmenham" that he was jerked into attention, to realize that he had just received a most interesting invitation.

"... would find us a most congenial assembly, I am sure," Bubb-Dodington was saying, leaning toward Grey with that same attitude of fawning attention he had noted earlier.

"You feel I would be in sympathy with the interests of your society?" Grey contrived to infuse a faint tone of boredom, looking away from the man. Just over Bubb-Dodington's shoulder, he was conscious of the figure of Sir Francis Dashwood, dark and bulky. Dashwood's deep-set eyes rested upon them, even as he carried on a conversation, and a ripple of apprehension raised the hairs on the back of Grey's neck.

"I am flattered, but I scarcely think ..." he began, turning away.

"Oh, do not think you would be quite strange!" Bubb-Dodington interrupted, beaming with oily deprecation. "You are acquainted with Mr. Everett, I think? He will make one of our number."

"Indeed." Grey's mouth had gone dry. "I see. Well, you must allow me to consult ..." Muttering excuses, he escaped, finding refuge a moment later in the company of Harry Quarry and his sister-in-law, sharing cups of brandy punch at the nearby buffet.

"It galls me," Harry was saying, "that such petty time-servers and flaunting jackanapes make my kin to be the equal of the he-strumpets and buggerantoes that infest the Arcade. I've known Bob Gerald from a lad, and I will swear my life upon his honor!" Quarry's large hand clenched upon his glass as he glowered at Mr. Justice Margrave's back.

"Have a care, Harry, my dear." Lucinda placed a hand on his sleeve. "Those are my good crystal cups. If you must crush something, let it

be the hazelnuts."

"I shall let it be that fellow's windpipe, and he does not cease to air his idiocy," said Quarry. He scowled horridly, but suffered himself to be turned away, still talking. "What can Richard be thinking of, to entertain such scum? Dashwood, I mean, and now this ..."

Grey started, and felt a chill down his spine. Quarry's blunt features bore no trace of resemblance to his dead cousin-by-marriage, and yet —his face contorted with fury, eyes bulging slightly as he spoke ... Grey closed his eyes tightly, summoning the vision.

He left Quarry and Lady Lucinda abruptly, without excuse, and made his way hastily to the large gilded mirror that hung above a sideboard in the dining room.

Leaning over the skeletal remains of a roasted pheasant, he stared at his mouth—painstakingly forming the shapes he had seen on Robert Gerald's mouth—and now again on Harry Quarry's, hearing in his mind as he made them the sound of Robert Gerald's effortful—but unvoiced—last word.

"Dashwood."

Quarry had followed him, brows drawn down in puzzlement.

"What the devil, Grey? Why are you making faces in the mirror? Are you ill?"

"No," said Grey, though in fact he felt very ill. He stared at his own image in the mirror, as though it were some ghastly specter.

Another face appeared, and dark eyes met his own in the mirror. The two reflections were close in size and form, both possessed of a tidy muscularity and a fineness of feature that had led more than one observer to remark in company that they could be twins—one light, one dark.

"You will come to Medmenham, won't you?" The murmured words were warm in his ear, George's body so close that he could feel the pressure of hip and thigh. Everett's hand touched his, lightly.

"I should ... particularly desire it."

Part III



Christened in Blood

Medmenham Abbey West Wycombe

It was not until the third night at Medmenham that anything untoward occurred. To that point—despite Quarry's loudly expressed doubts beforehand—it had been a house party much like any other in Lord John's experience, though with more talk of politics and less of hunting than was customary.

In spite of the talk and entertainment, though, there was an odd air of secrecy about the house. Whether it was some attitude on the part of the servants, or something unseen but sensed among the guests, Grey could not tell, but it was real; it floated on the air of the Abbey like smoke on water.

The only other oddity was the lack of women. While females of good family from the countryside near West Wycombe were invited to dine, all of the houseguests were male. The thought occurred to Grey that from outward appearance, it might almost be one of those sodomitical societies so decried in the London broadsheets. In appearance only, though; there was no hint of such behavior. Even George Everett gave no hint of any sentiment save the amiability of renewed friendship.

No, it was not that kind of behavior that had given Sir Francis and his restored abbey the name of scandal. Exactly what *did* lie behind the whispers of notoriety was yet a mystery.

Grey knew one thing: Dashwood was not Gerald's murderer, at least not directly. Discreet inquiry had established Sir Francis's whereabouts, and shown him far from Forby Street at the time of the outrage. There was the possibility of hired assassination, though, and Robert Gerald had seen *something* in the moment of his death that caused him to utter that last silent accusation.

There was nothing so far to which Grey could point as evidence,

either of guilt or depravity. Still, if evidence was to be found anywhere, it must be at Medmenham—the deconsecrated abbey which Sir Francis had restored from ruins and made a showplace for his political ambitions.

Among the talk and entertainments, though, Grey was conscious of a silent process of evaluation, plain in the eyes and manner of his companions. He was being watched, his fitness gauged—but for what?

"What is it that Sir Francis wants with me?" he had asked bluntly, walking in the gardens with Everett on the second afternoon. "I have nothing to appeal to such a man."

George smiled. He wore his own hair, dark and shining, and the chilly breeze stroked strands of it across his cheeks.

"You underestimate your own merits, John—as always. Of course, nothing becomes manly virtue more than simple modesty." He glanced sidelong, mouth quirking with appreciation.

"I scarce think my personal attributes are sufficient to intrigue a man of Dashwood's character," Grey answered dryly.

"More to the point," Everett said, arching one brow, "what is it in Sir Francis that so intrigues *you*? You have not spoke of anything, save to question me about him."

"You would be better suited to answer that than I," Grey answered boldly. "I hear you are an intimate—the valet tells me you have been a guest at Medmenham many times this year past. What is it draws you to seek his company?"

George grunted in amusement, then flung back his head, breathing in the damp air with enjoyment. Lord John did likewise; autumn smells of leaf mold and chimney smoke, spiced with the tang of ripe muscats from the arbor nearby. Scents to stir the blood; cold air to sting cheeks and hands, exercise to stimulate and weary the limbs, making the glowing leisure of the fireside and the comforts of a dark, warm bed so appealing by contrast.

"Power," George said at last. He lifted a hand toward the Abbey—an impressive pile of gray stone, at once stalwart in shape and delicate in design. "Dashwood aspires to great things; I would join him on that upward reach." He cast a glance at Grey. "And you, John? It has been some time since I presumed to know you, and yet I should not have said that a thirst for social influence formed much part of your own desires."

Grey wished no discussion of his desires; not at the moment.

" 'The desire of power in excess caused the angels to fall,' " he

quoted.

"The desire of knowledge in excess caused man to fall.' "George completed the quote, and uttered a short laugh. "What is it that you seek to know then, John?" He turned his head toward Grey, dark eyes creased against the wind, and smiled as though he knew the answer.

"The truth of the death of Robert Gerald."

He had mentioned Gerald to each of the house party in turn, choosing his moment, probing delicately. No delicacy here; he wished to shock, and did so. George's face went comically blank, then hardened into disapproval.

"Why do you seek to entangle yourself in that sordid affair?" he demanded. "Such association cannot but harm your own reputation—such as it is."

That stung, as it was meant to.

"My reputation is my own affair," Grey said, "as are my reasons. Did you know Gerald?"

"No," Everett answered shortly. By unspoken consent, they turned toward the Abbey, and walked back in silence.



On the third day, something changed. A sense of nervous anticipation seemed to pervade the air, and the air of secrecy grew heavier. Grey felt as though some stifling lid pressed down upon the Abbey, and spent as much time as possible out of doors.

Still, nothing untoward occurred during the day or evening, and he retired as usual, soon after ten o'clock. Dismissing the valet, he undressed alone. He was tired from his long rambles over the countryside, but it was early yet. He picked up a book, attempted to read, but the words seemed to slide away from his eyes. His head nodded, and he slept, sitting up in the chair.

The sound of the clock striking below in the hall woke him from uneasy dreams of dark pools and drowning. He sat up, a metal taste like blood in his mouth, and rubbed away the sleep from his eyes. Time for his nightly signal to Quarry.

Unwilling to allow Grey to risk such company alone, Quarry had followed Lord John to West Wycombe. He would, he insisted, there take up station in the meadow facing the guest wing each night, between the hours of eleven and one o'clock. Lord John was to pass a candle flame three times across the glass each night, as a sign that all was so far well.

Feeling ridiculous, Grey had done so on each of the first two nights. Tonight, he felt some small sense of reassurance as he bent to light his taper from the hearth. The house was silent, but not asleep. Something stirred, somewhere in the Abbey; he could feel it. Perhaps the ghosts of the ancient monks—perhaps something else.

The candle flame showed the reflection of his own face, a wan oval in the glass, his light blue eyes gone to dark holes. He stood a moment, holding the flame, then blew it out and went to bed, obscurely more comforted by the thought of Harry outside than by the knowledge of George Everett in the next room.

He waked in darkness, to find his bed surrounded by monks. Or men dressed as monks; each wore a rope-belted robe and a deepcowled hood, pulled far forward to hide the face. Beyond the first startled exclamation, he lay quiet. He might have thought them the ghosts of the Abbey, save that the reassuring scents of sweat and alcohol, of powder and pomade, told him otherwise.

None spoke, but hands pulled him from his bed and set him on his feet, stripped the nightshirt from his body, and helped him into a robe of his own. A hand cupped him intimately, a caress given under cover of darkness, and he breathed musk and myrrh.

No menaces were offered, and he knew his companions to be those men with whom he had broken bread at dinner. Still, his heart beat in his ears as he was conducted by darkened hallways into the garden, and then by lantern light through a maze of clipped yew. Beyond this, a path led down the side of a stony hill, curving into the darkness and finally turning back into the hillside itself.

Here they passed through a curious portal, this being an archway of wood and marble, carved into what he took to be the semblance of a woman's privates, opened wide. He examined this with curiosity; early experience with whores had made him vaguely familiar, but had afforded no opportunity for close inspection.

Once within this portal, a bell began to chime somewhere ahead. The "monks" formed themselves into a line, two by two, and shuffled slowly forward, beginning to chant.

The chant continued in the same vein—a perversion of various well-known prayers, some merely foolish nonsense, some clever or openly bawdy. Grey restrained a sudden urge to laugh, and bit his lip to stop it.

The solemn procession wound its way deeper and he smelled damp rock; were they in a cave? Evidently; as the passage widened, he saw light ahead and entered eventually into a large chamber, set with candles, whose rough-hewn walls indicated that they were indeed in a catacomb of sorts. The impression was heightened by the presence of a number of human skulls, set grinning atop their crossed thigh bones, like so many Jolly Rogers.

Grey found himself pressed into a place near the wall. One figure, robed in a cardinal's red, came forward, and Sir Francis Dashwood's voice intoned the beginning of the rite. The rite itself was a parody of the Mass, enacted with great solemnity, invocations made to the Master of Darkness, the chalice formed of an upturned skull.

In all truth, Grey found the proceedings tedious in the extreme, enlivened only by the appearance of a large Barbary ape, attired in bishop's cope and miter, who appeared at the Consecration. The animal sprang upon the altar, where it gobbled and slobbered over the bread provided and spilled wine upon the floor. It would have been less entertaining, Grey thought, had the beast's ginger whiskers and seamed countenance not reminded him so strongly of the Bishop of Ely, an old friend of his mother's.

At the conclusion of this rite, the men went out, with considerably less solemnity than when they had come in. A good deal had been drunk in the course of the rite, and their behavior was less restrained than that of the ape.

Two men near the end of the line seized Grey by the arms and compelled him into a small alcove, around which the others had gathered. He found himself bent backward over a marble basin, the robe pushed down from his shoulders. Dashwood intoned a prayer in reverse Latin, and something warm and sticky cascaded over Grey's head, blinding him and causing him to struggle and curse in the grip of his captors.

"I baptize thee, child of Asmodeus, son of blood ..." A kick from Grey's foot caught Dashwood under the chin and sent him reeling backward. A hard punch in the pit of the stomach knocked the breath from Grey and quieted him for the remainder of the brief ceremony.

Then they set him on his feet, bloodstained, and gave him drink from a jeweled cup. He tasted opium in the wine, and let as much as he dared dribble down his chin as he drank. Even so, he felt the dreamy tendrils of the drug steal through his mind, and his balance grew precarious, sending him lurching through the crowd, to the great hilarity of the robed onlookers.

Hands took him by the elbows and propelled him down a corridor, and another, and another. A draft of warm air, and he found himself thrust through a door, which closed behind him.

The chamber was small, furnished with nothing save a narrow couch against the far wall, and a table upon which stood a flagon, several glasses ... and a knife. Grey staggered to the table, and braced himself with both hands to keep from falling.

There was a strange smell in the room. At first he thought he had vomited, sickened by blood and wine, but then he saw the pool of it, across the room by the bed. It was only then that he saw the girl.

She was young and naked and dead. Her body lay limp, sprawled white in the light, but her eyes were dull and her lips blue, the traces of sickness trailing down her face and across the bedclothes. Grey backed slowly away, shock washing the last remnants of the drug from his blood.

He rubbed both hands hard across his face, striving to think. What was this, why was he here, with the body of this young woman? He brought himself to come closer, to look. She was no one he had seen before; the calluses upon her hands and the state of her feet marked her as a servant or a country girl.

He turned sharply, went to the door. Locked, of course. But what was the point? He shook his head, his brain slowly clearing. Once clear, though, no answers came to mind. Blackmail, perhaps? It was true that Grey's family had influence, though he himself possessed none. But how could his presence here be put to such use?

It seemed he had spent forever in that buried room, pacing to and fro across the stone floor, until at last the door opened and a robed figure slipped through.

"George!"

"Bloody hell!" Ignoring Grey's turn toward him, Everett crossed the room and stood staring down at the girl, brows knit in consternation. "What's happened?" he demanded, swinging toward Grey.

"You tell me. Or rather, let us leave this place, and then you tell me."

Everett put out a quelling hand, urging silence. He thought for a moment, and then seemed to reach some conclusion. A slow smile grew across his face.

"Well enough," he said softly, to himself. He turned and reached toward Grey's waist, pulling loose the cord that bound the robe closed. Grey made no move to cover himself, though filled with astonishment at the gesture, given the circumstances.

This astonishment was intensified in the next instant, as Everett bent over the bed and wrapped the cord round the neck of the dead woman, tugging hard to draw it tight, so the rope bit deep into flesh. He stood, smiled at Grey, then crossed to the table, where he poured two glasses of wine from the flagon.

"Here." He handed one to Grey. "Don't worry, it's not drugged. You aren't drugged now, are you? No, I see not; I thought you hadn't had enough."

"Tell me what is happening." Grey took the glass, but made no move to drink. "Tell me, for God's sake!"

George smiled again, a queer look in his eyes, and picked up the knife. It was exotic in appearance; something Oriental, at least a foot long and wickedly sharp.

"It is the common initiation of the brotherhood," he said. "The new candidate, once approved, is baptized—it was pig's blood, by the way—and then brought to this room, where a woman is provided for his pleasure. Once his lust is slaked, an older brother comes to instruct him in the final rite of his acceptance—and to witness it."

Grey raised a sleeve and wiped cold sweat and pig's blood from his forehead.

"And the nature of this final rite is—"

"Sacrificial." George nodded acknowledgment toward the blade. "The act not only completes the initiation, but also insures the initiate's silence and his loyalty to the brotherhood."

A great coldness was creeping through Grey's limbs, making them stiff and heavy.

"And you have ... have done this?"

"Yes." Everett contemplated the form on the bed for a moment, one finger gently stroking the blade. At last he shook his head and sighed, murmuring to himself once more. "No, I think not."

He raised his eyes to Grey's, clear and shining in the lamplight. "I

would have spared you, I think, were it not for Bob Gerald."

The glass felt slick in Grey's hand, but he forced himself to speak calmly.

"So you did know him. Was it you who killed him?"

Everett nodded slowly, not taking his gaze from Grey's.

"It is ironic, is it not?" he said softly. "I desired membership in this brotherhood, whose watchword is vice, whose credo is wickedness—and yet had Bob Gerald told them what I am, they would have turned upon me like wolves. They hold all abomination dear—save one."

"And Robert Gerald knew what you were? Yet he did not speak your name as he died."

George shrugged, but his mouth twitched uneasily.

"He was a pretty lad, I thought—but I was wrong. No, he didn't know my name, but we met here—at Medmenham. It would have made no difference, had they not chosen him to join us. Were he to come again, though, and see me here ..."

"He would not have come again. He refused the invitation."

George's eyes narrowed, gauging his truth; then he shrugged.

"Perhaps if I had known that, he need not have died. And if he had not died, you would not have been chosen yourself—would not have come? No. Well, there's irony again for you, I suppose. And still—I think I would have killed him under any circumstance; it was too dangerous."

Grey had been keeping a watchful eye on the knife. He moved, unobtrusively, seeking to get the corner of the table betwixt himself and Everett.

"And the broadsheets? That was your doing?" He could, he thought, seize the table and throw it into Everett's legs, then try to overpower him. Disarmed, they were well-matched in strength.

"No, Whitehead's. He's the poet, after all." George smiled and stepped back, out of range. "They thought perhaps to take advantage of Gerald's death to discomfit Sir Richard—and chose that method, knowing nothing of his killer or the motive for his death. The greatest irony of all, is it not?"

George had moved the flagon out of reach. Grey stood half naked, with no weapon to hand save a glass of wine.

"So you intend now to procure my silence by claiming I am the murderer of this poor young woman?" Grey demanded, jerking his head toward the still figure on the bed. "What happened to her?"

"Accident," Everett said. "The women are drugged; she must have

vomited in her sleep and choked to death. But blackmail? No, that isn't what I mean to do."

Everett squinted at the bed, then at Grey, measuring distance.

"You sought to use a noose for your sacrificial duty—some mislike blood—and though you succeeded, the girl managed to seize the knife and wound you, severely enough that you bled to death before I could return to aid you. Tragic accident; such a pity. Move a little closer to the bed, John."

Never think a man is helpless, only because he's fettered. Grey flung his wine into Everett's face, then smashed his glass against the stones of the wall. He whirled on a heel and lunged upward, jabbing with all his might.

Everett grunted, one side of his handsome face laid open, spraying blood. He growled deep in his throat, baring bloody teeth, and ripped the blade across the air where Grey had stood a moment before. Half blinded by blood and snarling like a beast, he lunged and swung again. Grey ducked, was hit by a flying wrist, and fell across the woman's body. He rolled sideways, but was trapped by the folds of his robe.

The knife gleamed overhead. In desperation, he threw up his legs and thrust both feet into Everett's chest, flinging him backward.

Everett staggered, flailing back across the room, half-caught himself, then froze abruptly. The expression on his face showed vast surprise. His hand loosened, dropping the knife, and then drew slowly through the air, graceful in gesture as the dancer that he was. His fingers touched the reddened steel protruding from his chest, acknowledging defeat. He slumped slowly to the floor.

Harry Quarry put a foot on Everett's back and freed his sword with a vicious yank.

"Good job I waited, wasn't it? Saw those buggers with their lanterns and all, and thought best I see what mischief was afoot."

"Mischief," Grey echoed. He stood up, or tried to. His knees had gone to water. "You ... did you hear?" His heart was beating very slowly; he wondered in a dreamy way whether it might stop any minute.

Quarry glanced at him, expression unreadable.

"I heard." He wiped his sword, then sheathed it, and came to the bed, bending down to peer at Grey. How much had he heard, Grey wondered—and what had he made of it?

A rough hand brushed back his hair. He felt the stiffness matting it,

and thought of Robert Gerald's mother.

"It's not my blood," he said.

"Some of it is," said Quarry, and traced a line down the side of his neck. In the wake of the touch, he felt the sting of the cut, unnoticed in the moment of infliction.

"Never fear," said Quarry, and gave him a hand to get up. "It will make a pretty scar."

"Lord John and the Succubus"



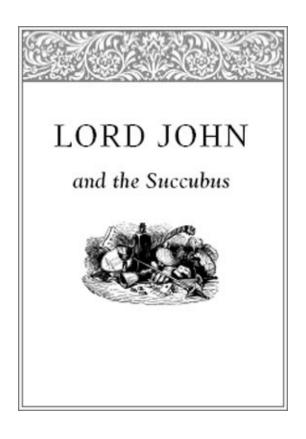
In 2003, I was invited to write a novella for an anthology edited by Robert Silverberg, titled *Legends II: New Short Novels by the Modern Masters of Fantasy.* I had slight reservations—as my World of War Craft–playing son asked, seeing the contract, "Since when are you a modern master of fantasy, Mom?"—but(a) was very flattered to be asked to share a volume with George R. R. Martin, Terry Brooks, and Orson Scott Card, and(b) I'm inclined to regard the notion of literary genres in the same light as a Chinese menu, and (c) if I had a family motto, it would probably be "Why not?" (the accompanying coat-of-arms being a stone circle quartered on a field of azure and crimson with rampant hippogriffs). So I did.

However, I had the same concerns regarding the main characters of the Outlander books that obtained when I wrote "Hellfire." Reflecting that it had worked once, so why not?, I decided to call Lord John into active duty once more.

The difficulty being, of course, that Lord John Grey is not a time-traveler, nor yet a telepath, a shape-shifter, nor even an inhabitant of an alternate universe loosely based on the history and culture of Scotland or Turkestan. But, on the other hand, there was no requirement that the main character of this putative novella be himself a creature of fantasy—and a story in which a perfectly normal (well, more or less) hero comes into conflict with supernatural creatures is a solid archetype. Hey, if it was good enough for Homer, it's good enough for me.

And so, "Lord John and the Succubus" was published in 2004, as part of the *Legends II* anthology. In terms of Lord John's chronology, this story follows the novel, *Lord John and the Private Matter,* and in it, we renew our acquaintance with Tom Byrd, Lord John's valet, and his friend, Stephan von Namtzen. Set in Germany (which didn't actually exist as a political entity at the time, but was a recognizable geographical region) in the early phases of the Seven Years War,

| "Succubus" is a supernatural murder | mystery, with military flourishes. |
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Historical note: Between 1756 and 1763, Great Britain joined with her allies, Prussia and Hanover, to fight against the mingled forces of Austria, Saxony—and England's ancient foe, France. In the autumn of 1757, the Duke of Cumberland was obliged to surrender at Kloster-Zeven, leaving the allied armies temporarily shattered and the forces of Frederick the Great of Prussia and his English allies encircled by French and Austrian troops.

Chapter 1



Death Rides a Pale Horse

Grey's spoken German was improving by leaps and bounds, but found itself barely equal to the present task.

After a long, boring day of rain and paperwork, there had come the sound of loud dispute in the corridor outside his office, and the head of Lance-Korporal Helwig appeared in his doorway, wearing an apologetic expression.

"Major Grey?" he said "Ich habe ein kleines Englische problem."

A moment later, Lance-Korporal Helwig had disappeared down the corridor like an eel sliding into mud, and Major John Grey, English liaison to the Imperial Fifth Regiment of Hanoverian Foot, found himself adjudicating a three-way dispute among an English private, a gypsy prostitute, and a Prussian tavern owner.

A little English problem, Helwig had described it as. The problem, as Grey saw it, was rather the lack of English.

The tavern owner spoke the local dialect with such fluency and speed that Grey grasped no more than one word in ten. The English private, who normally probably knew no more German than "ja," "nein," and the two or three crude phrases necessary to accomplish immoral transactions, was so stricken with fury that he was all but speechless in his own tongue, as well.

The gypsy, whose abundant charms were scarcely impaired by a missing tooth, had German that most nearly matched Grey's own in terms of grammar—though her vocabulary was immensely more colorful and detailed.

Using alternate hands to quell the sputterings of the private and the torrents of the Prussian, Grey concentrated his attention carefully on the gypsy's explanations—meanwhile taking care to consider the source, which meant discounting the factual basis of most of what she said.

"... and then the disgusting pig of an Englishman, he put his [incomprehensible colloquial expression] into my [unknown gypsy

word]! And then ..."

"She said, she said she'd do it for sixpence, sir! She did, she said so —but, but, then ..."

"These-barbarian-pig-dogs-did-revolting-things-under-the-table-and-made-it-fall-over-so-the-leg-of-the-table-was-brokenand-the-dishes-broken-too-even-my-large-platter-which-cost-six-thalers-at-St.Martin's-Fair-and-the-meat-was-ruined-by-falling-onthe-floor-and-even-if-it-was-not-the-dogs-fell-upon-it-snarlingso-that-I-was-bitten-when-I-tried-to-seize-it-away-from-them-andall-the-time-these-vile-persons-were-copulating-like-filthy-foxeson-the-floor-and-THEN ..."

At length, an accommodation was reached, by means of Grey's demanding that all three parties produce what money was presently in their possession. A certain amount of shifty-eyed reluctance and dramatic pantomimes of purse and pocket-searching having resulted in three small heaps of silver and copper, he firmly rearranged these in terms of size and metal value, without reference as to the actual coinage involved, as these appeared to include the currency of at least six different principalities.

Eyeing the gypsy's ensemble, which included both gold earrings and a crude but broad gold band round her finger, he assigned roughly equitable heaps to her and to the private, whose name, when asked, proved to be Bodger.

Assigning a slightly larger heap to the tavern owner, he then scowled fiercely at the three combatants, jabbed a finger at the money, and jerked a thumb over his shoulder, indicating that they should take the coins and leave while he was still in possession of his temper.

This they did, and storing away a most interesting gypsy curse for future reference, Grey returned tranquilly to his interrupted correspondence.

26 September, 1757

To Harold, Earl of Melton From Lord John Grey The Township of Gundwitz Kingdom of Prussia In reply to your request for information regarding my situation, I beg to say that I am well-suited. My duties are ...

He paused, considering, then wrote *interesting*, smiling slightly to himself at thought of what interpretation Hal might put upon that,

... and the conditions comfortable. I am quartered with several other English and German officers in the house of a Princess Louisa von Lowenstein, the widow of a minor Prussian noble, who possesses a fine estate near the town.

We have two English regiments quartered here: Sir Peter Hicks's 35th, and half of the 52nd—I am told Colonel Ruysdale is in command, but have not yet met him, the 52nd having arrived only days ago. As the Hanoverians to whom I am attached and a number of Prussian troops are occupying all the suitable quarters in the town, Hicks's men are encamped some way to the south; Ruysdale to the north.

French forces are reported to be within twenty miles, but we expect no immediate trouble. Still, so late in the year, the snow will come soon, and put an end to the fighting; they may try for a final thrust before the winter sets in. Sir Peter begs me send his regards.

He dipped his quill again, and changed tacks.

My grateful thanks to your good wife for the smallclothes, which are superior in quality to what is available here.

At this point, he was obliged to transfer the pen to his left hand in order to scratch ferociously at the inside of his left thigh. He was wearing a pair of the local German product under his breeches, and while they were well-laundered and not infested with vermin, they were made of coarse linen and appeared to have been starched with some substance derived from potatoes, which was irritating in the extreme.

Tell Mother I am still intact, and not starving,

he concluded, transferring the pen back to his right hand.

Quite the reverse, in fact; Princess von Lowenstein has an excellent cook.

Your Most Affec't. Brother,

J.

Sealing this with a brisk stamp of his half-moon signet, he then took down one of the ledgers and a stack of reports, and began the mechanical work of recording deaths and desertions. There was an outbreak of bloody flux among the men; more than a score had been lost to it in the last two weeks.

The thought brought the gypsy woman's last remarks to mind. Blood and bowels had both come into that, though he feared he had missed some of the refinements. Perhaps she had merely been trying to curse him with the flux?

He paused for a moment, twiddling the quill. It was rather uncommon for the flux to occur in the cold weather; it was more commonly a disease of hot summer, while winter was the season for consumption, catarrh, influenza, and fever.

He was not at all inclined to believe in curses, but did believe in poison. A whore would have ample opportunity to administer poison to her customers ... but to what end? He turned to another folder of reports and shuffled through them, but saw no increase in the report of robbery or missing items—and the dead soldiers' comrades would certainly have noted anything of the kind. A man's belongings were sold by auction at his death, the money used to pay his debts and—if anything were left—to be sent to his family.

He put back the folder and shrugged, dismissing it. Illness and death trod closely in a soldier's footsteps, regardless of season or gypsy curse. Still, it might be worth warning Private Bodger to be wary of what he ate, particularly in the company of light-frigates and other dubious women.

A gentle rain had begun to fall again outside, and the sound of it against the windowpanes combined with the soothing shuffle of paper and scratch of quill to induce a pleasant sense of mindless drowsiness. He was disturbed from this trancelike state by the sound of footsteps on the wooden stair.

Captain Stephan von Namtzen, Landgrave von Erdberg, poked his handsome blond head through the doorway, ducking automatically to avoid braining himself on the lintel. The gentleman following him had no such difficulty, being a foot or so shorter.

"Captain von Namtzen," Grey said, standing politely. "May I be of assistance?"

"I have here Herr Blomberg," Stephan said in English, indicating the small, round, nervous-looking individual who accompanied him. "He wishes to borrow your horse."

Grey was sufficiently startled by this that he merely said, "Which one?" rather than "Who is Herr Blomberg?" or "What does he want with a horse?"

The first of these questions was largely academic in any case; Herr Blomberg wore an elaborate chain of office about his neck, done in broad, flat links of enamel and chased gold, from which depended a seven-pointed starburst, enclosing a plaque of enamel on which was painted some scene of historic interest. Herr Blomberg's engraved silver coat buttons and shoe buckles were sufficient to proclaim his wealth; the chain of office merely confirmed his importance as being secular, rather than noble.

"Herr Blomberg is bürgermeister of the town," Stephan explained, taking matters in a strictly logical order of importance, as was his habit. "He requires a white stallion, in order that he shall discover and destroy a succubus. Someone has told him that you possess such a horse," he concluded, frowning at the temerity of whoever had been bandying such information.

"A succubus?" Grey asked, automatically rearranging the logical order of this speech, as was *his* habit.

Herr Blomberg had no English, but evidently recognized the word, for he nodded vigorously, his old-fashioned wig bobbing, and launched into impassioned speech, accompanied by much gesticulation.

With Stephan's assistance, Grey gathered that the town of Gundwitz had recently suffered a series of mysterious and disturbing events, involving a number of men who claimed to have been victimized in their sleep by a young woman of demonic aspect. By the time these events had made their way to the attention of Herr Blomberg, the situation was serious; a man had died.

"Unfortunately," Stephan added, still in English, "the dead man is ours." He pressed his lips tightly together, conveying his dislike of the situation.

"Ours?" Grey asked, unsure what this usage implied, other than that the victim had been a soldier.

"Mine," Stephan clarified, looking further displeased. "One of the Prussians."

The Landgrave von Erdberg had three hundred Hanoverian foot troops, raised from his own lands, equipped and funded from his personal fortune. In addition, Captain von Namtzen commanded two additional companies of Prussian horse, and was in temporary command of the fragments of an artillery company whose officers had all died in an outbreak of the bloody flux.

Grey wished to hear more details regarding both the immediate death and—most particularly—the demoniac visitations, but his questions along these lines were interrupted by Herr Blomberg, who had been growing more restive by the moment.

"It grows soon dark," the bürgermeister pointed out in German. "We do not wish to fall into an open grave, so wet as it is."

"Ein offenes Grab?" Grey repeated, feeling a sudden chill draft on the back of his neck.

"This is true," Stephan said, with a nod of moody acquiescence. "It would be a terrible thing if your horse were to break his leg; he is a splendid creature. Come then, let us go."



"What *is* a s-succubus, me lord?" Tom Byrd's teeth were chattering, mostly from chill. The sun had long since set, and it was raining much harder. Grey could feel the wet seeping through the shoulders of his officer's greatcoat; Byrd's thin jacket was already soaked through, pasted to the young valet's stubby torso like butcher's paper round a joint of beef.

"I believe it is a sort of female ... spirit," Grey said, carefully avoiding the more evocative term "demon." The churchyard gates yawned before them like open jaws, and the darkness beyond seemed sinister in the extreme. No need to terrify the boy unnecessarily.

"Horses don't like ghosts," Byrd said, sounding truculent. "Everybody knows that, me lord."

He wrapped his arms round himself, shivering, and huddled closer

to Karolus, who shook his mane as though in agreement, showering water liberally over both Grey and Byrd.

"Surely you don't believe in ghosts, Tom?" Grey said, trying to be jocularly reassuring. He swiped a strand of wet fair hair out of his face, wishing Stephan would hurry.

"'Tisn't a matter of what *I* don't believe in, me lord," Byrd replied. "What if this lady's ghost believes in *us*? Who is she, anyway?" The lantern he carried was sputtering fitfully in the wet, despite its shield. Its dim light failed to illumine more than a vague outline of boy and horse, but perversely caught the shine of their eyes, lending them a disturbingly supernatural appearance, like staring wraiths.

Grey glanced aside, keeping an eye out for Stephan and the bürgermeister, who had gone to assemble a digging party. There was some movement outside the tavern, just visible at the far end of the street. That was sensible of Stephan. Men with a fair amount of beer on board were much more likely to be enthusiastic about the current prospect than were sober ones.

"Well, I do not believe that it is precisely a matter of ghosts," he said. "The German belief, however, seems to be that the succubus ... er ... the feminine spirit ... may possess the body of a recently dead person, however."

Tom cast a look into the inky depths of the churchyard, and glanced back at Grey.

"Oh?" he said.

"Ah," Grey replied.

Byrd pulled the slouch hat low on his forehead and hunched his collar up round his ears, clutching the horse's halter rope close to his chest. Nothing of his round face now showed save a downturned mouth, but that was eloquent.

Karolus stamped one foot and shifted his weight, tossing his head a little. He didn't seem to mind either rain or churchyard, but was growing restive. Grey patted the stallion's thick neck, taking comfort from the solid feel of the cold, firm hide and massive body. Karolus turned his head and blew hot breath affectionately into his ear.

"Almost ready," he said soothingly, twining a fist in the horse's soggy mane. "Now, Tom. When Captain von Namtzen arrives with his men, you and Karolus will walk forward very slowly. You are to lead him back and forth across the churchyard. Keep a few feet in front of him, but leave some slack in the rope."

The point of this procedure, of course, was to keep Karolus from

stumbling over a gravestone or falling into any open graves, by allowing Tom to do it first. Ideally, Grey had been given to understand, the horse should be turned into the churchyard and allowed to wander over the graves at his own will, but neither he nor Stephan was willing to risk Karolus's valuable legs in the dark.

He had suggested waiting until the morning, but Herr Blomberg was insistent. The succubus must be found, without delay. Grey was more than curious to hear the details of the attacks, but had so far been told little more than that a Private Koenig had been found dead in his quarters, the body bearing marks that made his manner of death clear. What marks? Grey wondered.

Classically educated, he had read of succubi and incubi, but had been taught to regard such references as quaintly superstitious, of a piece with other medieval popish nonsense like saints who strolled about with their heads in their hands or statues of the Virgin whose tears healed the sick. His father had been a rationalist, an observer of the ways of nature and a firm believer in the logic of phenomena.

His two months' acquaintance with the Germans, though, had shown him that they were deeply superstitious; more so even than the English common soldiers. Even Stephan kept a small, carved image of some pagan deity about his person at all times, to guard against being struck by lightning, and the Prussians seemed to harbor similar notions, judging from Herr Blomberg's behavior.

The digging party was making its way up the street now, bright with sputtering torches and emitting snatches of song. Karolus snorted and pricked his ears; Karolus, Grey had been told, was fond of parades.

"Well, then." Stephan loomed suddenly out of the murk at his side, looking pleased with himself under the broad shelf of his hat. "All is ready, Major?"

"Yes. Go ahead then, Tom."

The diggers—mostly laborers, armed with spades, hoes, and mattocks—stood back, lurching tipsily and stepping on each other's shoes. Tom, lantern held delicately before him in the manner of an insect's feeler, took several steps forward—then stopped. He turned, tugging on the rope.

Karolus stood solidly, declining to move.

"I told you, me lord," Byrd said, sounding more cheerful. "Horses don't like ghosts. Me uncle had an old cart horse once, wouldn't take a step past a churchyard. We had to take him clear round two streets

to get him past."

Stephan made a noise of disgust.

"It is not a ghost," he said, striding forward, prominent chin held high. "It is a succubus. A demon. That is quite different."

"Daemon?" one of the diggers said, catching the English word and looking suddenly dubious. "Ein Teufel?"

"Demon?" said Tom Byrd, and gave Grey a look of profound betrayal.

"Something of the kind, I believe," Grey said, and coughed. "If such a thing should exist, which I doubt it does."

A chill of uncertainty seemed to have overtaken the party with this demonstration of the horse's reluctance. There was shuffling and murmuring, and heads turned to glance back in the direction of the tavern.

Stephan, magnificently disregarding this tendency to pusillanimity in his troops, clapped Karolus on the neck and spoke to him encouragingly in German. The horse snorted and arched his neck, but still resisted Tom Byrd's tentative yanks on his halter. Instead, he swiveled his enormous head toward Grey, jerking Byrd off his feet. The boy lost his grip on the rope, staggered off balance, trying vainly to keep hold of the lantern, and finally slipped on a stone submerged in the mud, landing on his buttocks with a rude *splat*.

This mishap had the salutary effect of causing the diggers to roar with laughter, restoring their spirits. Several of the torches had by now been extinguished by the rain, and everyone was thoroughly wet, but goatskin flasks and pottery jugs were produced from a number of pockets and offered to Tom Byrd by way of restorative, being then passed round the company in sociable fashion.

Grey took a deep swig of the fiery plum liquor himself, handed back the jug, and came to a decision.

"I'll ride him."

Before Stephan could protest, Grey had taken a firm grip on Karolus's mane and swung himself up on the stallion's broad back. Karolus appeared to find Grey's familiar weight soothing; the broad white ears, which had been pointing to either side in suspicion, rose upright again, and the horse started forward willingly enough at Grey's nudge against his sides.

Tom, too, seemed heartened, and ran to pick up the trailing halter rope. There was a ragged cheer from the diggers, and the party moved awkwardly after them, through the yawning gates. It seemed much darker in the churchyard than it had looked from outside. Much quieter, too; the jokes and chatter of the men died away into an uneasy silence, broken only by an occasional curse as someone knocked against a tombstone in the dark. Grey could hear the patter of rain on the brim of his hat, and the suck and thump of Karolus's hooves as he plodded obediently through the mud.

He strained his eyes to see what lay ahead, beyond the feeble circle of light cast by Tom's lantern. It was black-dark, and he felt cold, despite the shelter of his greatcoat. The damp was rising, mist coming up out of the ground; he could see wisps of it purling away from Tom's boots, disappearing in the lantern light. More of it drifted in an eerie fog round the mossy tombstones of neglected graves, leaning like rotted teeth in their sockets.

The notion, as it had been explained to him, was that a white stallion had the power to detect the presence of the supernatural. The horse would stop at the grave of the succubus, which could then be opened and steps taken to destroy the creature.

Grey found a number of logical assumptions wanting in this proposal; chief among which—putting aside the question of the existence of succubi, and why a sensible horse should choose to have anything to do with one—was that Karolus was not choosing his own path. Tom was doing his best to keep slack in the rope, but as long as he held it, the horse was plainly going to follow him.

On the other hand, he reflected, Karolus was unlikely to stop *anywhere*, so long as Tom kept walking. That being true, the end result of this exercise would be merely to cause them all to miss their suppers and to render them thoroughly wet and chilled. Still, he supposed they would be still more wet and chilled if obliged actually to open graves and perform whatever ritual might follow—

A hand clamped itself on his calf, and he bit his tongue—luckily, as it kept him from crying out.

"You are all right, Major?" It was Stephan, looming up beside him, tall and dark in a woolen cloak. He had left aside his plumed helmet, and wore a soft-brimmed wide hat against the rain, which made him look both less impressive and more approachable.

"Certainly," Grey said, mastering his temper. "How long must we do this?"

Von Namtzen lifted one shoulder in a shrug.

"Until the horse stops, or until Herr Blomberg is satisfied."

"Until Herr Blomberg begins wanting his supper, you mean." He

could hear the bürgermeister's voice at a distance behind them, lifted in exhortation and reassurance.

A white plume of breath floated out from under the brim of von Namtzen's hat, the laugh behind it barely audible.

"He is more ... resolute?... than you might suppose. It is his duty, the welfare of the village. He will endure as long as you will, I assure you."

Grey pressed his bitten tongue against the roof of his mouth, to prevent any injudicious remarks.

Stephan's hand was still curled about his leg, just above the edge of his boot. Cold as it was, he felt no warmth from the grasp, but the pressure of the big hand was both a comfort and something more.

"The horse—he goes well, nicht wahr?"

"He is wonderful," Grey said, with complete sincerity. "I thank you again."

Von Namtzen flicked his free hand in dismissal, but made a pleased sound, deep in his throat. He had—against Grey's protests—insisted upon making the stallion a gift to Grey, "in token of our alliance and our friendship," he had said firmly, clapping Grey upon both shoulders and then seizing him in fraternal embrace, kissing him formally upon both cheeks and mouth. At least, Grey was obliged to consider it a fraternal embrace, unless and until circumstance might prove it otherwise.

But Stephan's hand still curled round his calf, hidden under the skirt of his greatcoat.

Grey glanced toward the squat bulk of the church, a black mass that loomed beyond the churchyard.

"I am surprised that the priest is not with us. Does he disapprove of this—excursion?"

"The priest is dead. A fever of some kind, *die rote Ruhn*, more than a month since. They will send another, from Strausberg, but he has not come yet." Little wonder; a large number of French troops lay between Strausberg and the town; travel would be difficult, if not impossible.

"I see." Grey glanced back over his shoulder. The diggers had paused to open a fresh jug, torches tilting in momentary distraction.

"Do you believe in this—this succubus?" he asked, careful to keep his voice low.

Rather to his surprise, von Namtzen didn't reply at once. At last, the Hanoverian took a deep breath and hunched his broad shoulders in a gesture not quite a shrug.

"I have seen ... strange things from time to time," von Namtzen said at last, very quietly. "In this country, particularly. And a man is dead, after all."

The hand on his leg squeezed briefly and dropped away, sending a small flutter of sensation up Grey's back.

He took a deep breath of cold, heavy air, tinged with smoke, and coughed. It was like the smell of grave dirt, he thought, and then wished the thought had not occurred to him.

"One thing I confess I do not quite understand," he said, straightening himself in the saddle. "A succubus is a demon, if I am not mistaken. How is it, then, that such a creature should take refuge in a churchyard, in consecrated ground?"

"Oh," von Namtzen said, sounding surprised that this was not obvious. "The succubus takes possession of the body of a dead person, and rests within it by day. Such a person must of course be a corrupt and wicked sort, filled perhaps with depravity and perversion. So that even within the churchyard, the succubus will suitable refuge find."

"How recently must the person have died?" Grey asked. Surely it would make their perambulations more efficient were they to go directly to the more recent graves. From the little he could see in the swaying light of Tom's lantern, most of the stones nearby had stood where they were for decades, if not centuries.

"That I do not know," von Namtzen admitted. "Some people say that the body itself rises with the succubus; others say that the body remains in the grave, and by night the demon rides the air as a dream, seeking men in their sleep."

Tom Byrd's figure was indistinct in the gathering fog, but Grey saw his shoulders rise, nearly touching the brim of his hat. Grey coughed again, and cleared his throat.

"I see. And ... er ... what, precisely, do you intend to do, should a suitable body be located?"

Here von Namtzen was on surer ground.

"Oh, that is simple," he assured Grey. "We will open the coffin, and drive an iron rod through the corpse's heart. Herr Blomberg has brought one."

Tom Byrd made an inarticulate noise, which Grey thought it wiser to ignore.

"I see," he said. His nose had begun to run with the cold, and he wiped it on his sleeve. At least he no longer felt hungry.

They paced for a little in silence. The bürgermeister had fallen silent, too, though the distant sounds of squelching and glugging behind them indicated that the digging party was loyally persevering, with the aid of more plum brandy.

"The dead man," Grey said at last. "Private Koenig. Where was he found? And you mentioned marks upon the body—what sort of marks?"

Von Namtzen opened his mouth to answer, but was forestalled. Karolus glanced suddenly to the side, nostrils flaring. Then he flung up his head with a great *harrumph!* of startlement, nearly hitting Grey in the face. At the same moment, Tom Byrd uttered a high, thin scream, dropped the rope, and ran.

The big horse dropped his hindquarters, slewed round, and took off, leaping a small stone angel that stood in his path; Grey saw it as a looming pale blur, but had no time to worry about it before it passed beneath the stallion's outstretched hooves, its stone mouth gaping as though in astonishment.

Lacking reins and unable to seize the halter rope, Grey had no recourse but to grip the stallion's mane in both hands, clamp his knees, and stick like a burr. There were shouts and screams behind him, but he had no attention to spare for anything but the wind in his ears and the elemental force between his thighs.

They bounded like a skipping cannonball through the dark, striking the ground and rocketing upward, seeming to cover leagues at a stride. He leaned low and held on, the stallion's mane whipping like stinging nettles across his face, the horse's breath loud in his ears—or was it his own?

Through streaming eyes, he glimpsed light flickering in the distance, and realized they were heading now for the village. There was a six-foot stone wall in the way; he could only hope the horse noticed it in time.

He did; Karolus skidded to a stop, divots of mud and withered grass shooting up around him, sending Grey lurching up onto his neck. The horse reared, came down, then turned sharply, trotted several yards, and slowed to a walk, shaking his head as though to try to free himself of the flapping rope.

Legs quivering as with ague, Grey slid off, and with cold-stiff fingers, grasped the rope.

"You big white *bastard*!" he said, filled with the joy of survival, and laughed. "You're bloody marvelous!"

Karolus took this compliment with tolerant grace, and shoved at him, whickering softly. The horse seemed largely over his fright, whatever had caused it; he could but hope Tom Byrd fared as well.

Grey leaned against the wall, panting until his breath came back and his heart slowed a bit. The exhilaration of the ride was still with him, but he had now a moment's heed to spare for other things.

At the far side of the churchyard, the torches were clustered close together, lighting the fog with a reddish glow. He could see the digging party, standing in a knot shoulder-to-shoulder, all in attitudes of the most extreme interest. And toward him, a tall black figure came through the mist, silhouetted by the torch glow behind him. He had a moment's turn, for the figure looked sinister, dark cloak swirling about him—but it was, of course, merely Captain von Namtzen.

"Major Grey!" von Namtzen called. "Major Grey!"

"Here!" Grey shouted, finding breath. The figure altered course slightly, hurrying toward him with long, stilted strides that zigged and zagged to avoid obstacles in the path. How in God's name had Karolus managed on that ground, he wondered, without breaking a leg or both their necks?

"Major Grey," Stephan said, grasping both his hands tightly. "John. You are all right?"

"Yes," he said, gripping back. "Yes, of course. What has happened? My valet—Mr. Byrd—is he all right?"

"He has into a hole fallen, but he is not hurt. We have found a body. A dead man."

Grey felt a sudden lurch of the heart.

"What—"

"Not in a grave," the captain hastened to assure him. "Lying on the ground, leaning against one of the tombstones. Your valet saw the corpse's face most suddenly in the light of his lantern, and was frightened."

"I am not surprised. Is he one of yours?"

"No. One of yours."

"What?" Grey stared up at the Hanoverian. Stephan's face was no more than a pale oval in the dark. He squeezed Grey's hands gently and let them go.

"An English soldier. You will come?"

He nodded, feeling the cold air heavy in his chest. It was not impossible; there were English regiments to north and to south of the town, no more than an hour's ride away. Men off duty would often

come into town in search of drink, dice, and women. It was, after all, the reason for his own presence here—to act as liaison between the English regiments and their German allies.

The body was less horrible in appearance than he might have supposed; while plainly dead, the man seemed quite peaceful, slumped half sitting against the knee of a stern stone matron holding a book. There was no blood nor wound apparent, and yet Grey felt his stomach clench with shock.

"You know him?" Stephan was watching him intently, his own face stern and clean as those of the stone memorials about them.

"Yes." Grey knelt by the body. "I spoke to him only a few hours ago."

He put the backs of his fingers delicately against the dead man's throat—the slack flesh was clammy, slick with rain, but still warm. Unpleasantly warm. He glanced down, and saw that Private Bodger's breeches were opened, the stuff of his shirttail sticking out, rumpled over the man's thighs.

"Does he still have his dick, or did the she-thing eat it?" said a low voice in German. A faint, shocked snigger ran through the men. Grey pressed his lips tight together and jerked up the soggy shirttail. Private Bodger was somewhat more than intact, he was glad to see. So were the diggers; there was an audible sigh of mass relief behind him.

Grey stood, conscious all at once of tiredness and hunger, and of the rain pattering on his back.

"Wrap him in a canvas; bring him ..." Where? The dead man must be returned to his own regiment, but not tonight. "Bring him to the Schloss. Tom? Show them the way; ask the gardener to find you a suitable shed."

"Yes, me lord." Tom Byrd was nearly as pale as the dead man, and covered with mud, but once more in control of himself. "Will I take the horse, me lord? Or will you ride him?"

Grey had forgotten entirely about Karolus, and looked blankly about. Where had he gone?

One of the diggers had evidently caught the word "horse," and understood it, for a murmur of "Das Pferd" rippled through the group, and the men began to look round, lifting the torches high and craning their necks.

One man gave an excited shout, pointing into the dark. A large white blur stood a little distance away.

"He's on a grave! He's standing still! He's found it!"

This caused a stir of sudden excitement; everyone pressed forward together, and Grey feared lest the horse should take alarm and run again.

No such danger; Karolus was absorbed in nibbling at the soggy remnants of several wreaths, piled at the foot of an imposing tombstone. This stood guard over a small group of family graves—one very recent, as the wreaths and raw earth showed. As the torchlight fell upon the scene, Grey could easily read the name chiseled black into the stone.

BLOMBERG, it read.

Chapter 2



But What, Exactly, Does a Succubus Do?

They found Schloss Lowenstein alight with candles and welcoming fires, despite the late hour of their return. They were far past the time for dinner, but there was food in abundance on the sideboard, and Grey and von Namtzen refreshed themselves thoroughly, interrupting their impromptu feast periodically to give particulars of the evening's adventures to the house's other inhabitants, who were agog with curiosity.

"No! Herr Blomberg's *mother*?" The Princess von Lowen stein pressed fingers to her mouth, eyes wide in delighted shock. "Old Agathe? I don't believe it!"

"Nor does Herr Blomberg," von Namtzen assured her, reaching for a leg of roast pheasant. "He was most ... vehement?" He turned toward Grey, eyebrows raised, then turned back to the princess, nodding with assurance. "Vehement."

He had been. Grey would have chosen "apoplectic" as the better description, but was reasonably sure that none of the Germans present would know the term and had no idea how to translate it. They were all speaking English, as a courtesy to the British officers present, who included a captain of horse named Billman, Colonel Sir Peter Hicks, and a Lieutenant Dundas, a young Scottish officer in charge of an ordnance survey party.

"The old woman was a saint, absolutely a saint!" protested the Dowager Princess von Lowenstein, crossing herself piously. "I do not believe it, I cannot!"

The younger princess cast a brief glance at her mother-in-law, then away—meeting Grey's eyes. The princess had bright blue eyes, all the brighter for candlelight, brandy—and mischief.

The princess was a widow of a year's standing. Grey judged from the large portrait over the mantelpiece in the drawing room that the late prince had been roughly thirty years older than his wife; she bore her loss bravely. "Dear me," she said, contriving to look winsome, despite her anxiety. "As if the French were not enough! Now we are to be threatened with nightmare demons?"

"Oh, you will be quite safe, madam, I assure you," Sir Peter assured her. "What-what? With so many gallant gentlemen in the house?"

The ancient dowager glanced at Grey, and said something about gentlemen in highly accented German that Grey didn't quite catch, but the princess flushed like a peony in bloom, and von Namtzen, within earshot, choked on a swallow of wine.

Captain Billman smote the Hanoverian helpfully on the back.

"Is there news of the French?" Grey asked, thinking that perhaps the conversation should be guided back to more earthly concerns before the party retired to bed.

"Look to be a few of the bastards milling round," Billman said casually, cutting his eyes at the women in a manner suggesting that the word "few" was a highly discreet euphemism. "Expect they'll be moving on, heading for the west within a day or so."

Or heading for Strausberg, to join with the French regiment reported there, Grey thought. He returned Billman's meaningful look. Gundwitz lay in the bottom of a river valley—directly between the French position and Strausberg.

"So," Billman said, changing the subject with a heavy jocularity, "your succubus got away, did she?"

Von Namtzen cleared his throat.

"I would not say that, particularly," he said. "Herr Blomberg refused to allow the men to disturb the grave, of course, but I have men ordered to guard it."

"That'll be popular duty, I shouldn't think," said Sir Peter, with a glance at a nearby window, where even multiple thicknesses of woolen draperies and heavy shutters failed to muffle the thrum of rain and occasional distant boom of thunder.

"A good idea," one of the German officers said, in heavily accented but very correct English. "We do not wish to have rumors fly about, that there is a succubus behaving badly in the vicinity of the soldiers."

"But what, exactly, does a succubus *do*?" the Princess inquired, looking expectantly from face to face.

There was a sudden massive clearing of throats and gulping of wine, as all the men present tried to avoid her eye. An explosive snort from the dowager indicated what *she* thought of this cowardly behavior.

"A succubus is a she-demon," the old lady said, precisely. "It comes to men in dreams, and has congress with them, in order to extract from them their seed."

The princess's eyes went perfectly round. She *hadn't* known, Grey observed.

"Why?" she asked. "What does she do with it? Demons do not give birth, do they?"

Grey felt a laugh trying to force its way up under his breastbone, and hastily took another drink.

"Well, no," said Stephan von Namtzen, somewhat flushed, but still self-possessed. "Not exactly. The succubus procures the ... er ... essence," he gave a slight bow of apology to the dowager at this, "and then will mate with an incubus—this being a male demon, you see?"

The old lady looked grim, and placed a hand upon the religious medal she wore pinned to her gown.

Von Namtzen took a deep breath, seeing that everyone was hanging upon his words, and fixed his gaze upon the portrait of the late prince.

"The incubus then will seek out a human woman by night, couple with her, and impregnate her with the stolen seed—thus producing demon-spawn."

Lieutenant Dundas, who was very young and likely a Presbyterian, looked as though he were being strangled by his stock. The other men, all rather red in the face, attempted to look as though they were entirely familiar with the phenomenon under discussion and thought little of it. The dowager looked thoughtfully at her daughter-in-law, then upward at the picture of her deceased son, eyebrows raised as though in silent conversation.

"Ooh!" Despite the late hour and the informality of the gathering, the princess had a fan, which she spread now before her face in shock, big blue eyes wide above it. These eyes swung toward Grey, and blinked in pretty supplication.

"And do you really think, Lord John, that there is such a creature"—she shuddered, with an alluring quiver of the bosom—"prowling near?"

Neither eyes nor bosom swayed him, and it was clear to him that the princess found considerably more excitement than fear in the notion, but he smiled reassuringly, an Englishman secure in his rationality.

"No," he said. "I don't."

As though in instant contradiction of this stout opinion, a blast of wind struck the Schloss, carrying with it a burst of hail that rattled off the shutters and fell hissing down the chimney. The thunder of the hailstorm upon roof and walls and outbuildings was so great that for a moment it drowned all possibility of conversation.

The party stood as though paralyzed, listening to the roar of the elements. Grey's eyes met Stephan's; the Hanoverian lifted his chin a little in defiance of the storm, and gave him a small, private smile. Grey smiled back, then glanced away—just in time to see a dark shape fall from the chimney and plunge into the flames with a piercing shriek.

The shriek was echoed at once by the women—and possibly by Lieutenant Dundas, though Grey could not quite swear to it.

Something was struggling in the fire, flapping and writhing, and the stink of scorched skin came sharp and acrid in the nose. Acting by sheer instinct, Grey seized a poker and swept the thing out of the fire and onto the hearth, where it skittered crazily, emitting sounds that pierced his eardrums.

Stephan lunged forward and stamped on the thing, putting an end to the unnerving display.

"A bat," he said calmly, removing his boot. "Take it away."

The footman to whom he addressed this command came hastily, and flinging a napkin over the blackened corpse, scooped it up and carried it out on a tray—this ceremonial disposal giving Grey a highly inappropriate vision of the bat making a second appearance at breakfast, roasted and garnished with stewed prunes.

A sudden silence had fallen upon the party. This was broken by the sudden chiming of the clock, which made everyone jump, then laugh nervously.

The party broke up, the men standing politely as the women withdrew, then pausing for a few moments' conversation as they finished their wine and brandy. With no particular sense of surprise, Grey found Sir Peter at his elbow.

"A word with you, Major?" Sir Peter said quietly.

"Of course, sir."

The group had fragmented into twos and threes; it was not difficult to draw aside a little, under the pretext of examining a small, exquisite statue of Eros that stood on one of the tables.

"You'll be taking the body back to the Fifty-second in the morning, I expect?" The English officers had all had a look at Private Bodger,

declaring that he was none of theirs; by elimination, he must belong to Colonel Ruysdale's 52nd Foot, presently encamped on the other side of Gundwitz.

Without waiting for Grey's nod, Sir Peter went on, touching the statue abstractedly.

"The French are up to something; had a scout's report this afternoon, great deal of movement among the troops. They're preparing to move, but we don't yet know where or when. I should feel happier if a few more of Ruysdale's troops were to move to defend the bridge at Aschenwald, just in case."

"I see," Grey said cautiously. "And you wish me to carry a message to that effect to Colonel Ruysdale."

Sir Peter made a slight grimace.

"I've sent one. I think it might be helpful, though, if you were to suggest that von Namtzen wished it, as well."

Grey made a noncommittal noise. It was common knowledge that Sir Peter and Ruysdale were not on good terms. The colonel might well be more inclined to oblige a German ally.

"I will mention it to Captain von Namtzen," he said, "though I expect he will be agreeable." He would have taken his leave then, but Sir Peter hesitated, indicating that there was something further.

"Sir?" Grey said.

"I think," Sir Peter said, glancing round and lowering his voice still further, "that perhaps the princess should be advised—cautiously; no need to give alarm—that there is some slight possibility ... if the French were in fact to cross the valley ..." He rested a hand thoughtfully upon the head of Eros, and glanced at the other furnishings of the room, which included a number of rare and costly items. "She might wish to withdraw her family to a place of safety. Not amiss to suggest a few things be put safely away in the meantime. Shouldn't like to see a thing like that decorating a French general's desk, eh?"

"That" was the skull of an enormous bear—an ancient cave bear, the princess had informed the party earlier—that stood by itself upon a small, draped table. The skull was covered with gold, hammered flat and etched in primitive designs, with a row of semiprecious stones running up the length of the snout, then diverging to encircle the empty eye sockets. It was a striking object.

"Yes," Grey said, "I quite—Oh. You wish me to speak with the princess?"

Sir Peter relaxed a little, having accomplished his goal.

"She seems quite taken by you, Grey," he said, his original joviality returning. "Advice might be better received from you, eh? Besides, you're a liaison, aren't you?"

"To be sure," Grey said, less than pleased, but aware that he had received a direct order. "I shall attend to it as soon as I may, sir." He took leave of the others remaining in the drawing room, and made his way to the staircase that led to the upper floors.

The Princess von Lowenstein *did* seem most taken with him; he wasn't surprised that Sir Peter had noticed her smiles and languishings. Fortunately, she seemed equally taken with Stephan von Namtzen, going so far as to have Hanoverian delicacies served regularly at dinner in his honor.

At the top of the stair, he hesitated. There were three corridors opening off the landing, and it always took a moment to be sure which of the stone-floored halls led to his own chamber. A flicker of movement to the left attracted his eye, and he turned that way, to see someone dodge out of sight behind a tall armoire that stood against the wall.

"Wo ist das?" he asked sharply, and got a stifled gasp in reply.

Moving cautiously, he went and peered round the edge of the armoire, to find a small, dark-haired boy pressed against the wall, both hands clasped over his mouth and eyes round as saucers. The boy wore a nightshirt and cap, and had plainly escaped from his nursery. He recognized the child, though he had seen him only once or twice before; it was the princess's young son—what was the boy's name? Heinrich? Reinhardt?

"Don't be afraid," he said gently to the boy, in his slow, careful German. "I am your mother's friend. Where is your room?"

The boy didn't reply, but his eyes flicked down the hallway and back. Grey saw no open doors, but held out a hand to the boy.

"It is very late," he said. "Shall we find your bed?"

The boy shook his head so hard that the tassel of his nightcap slapped against the wall.

"I don't want to go to bed. There is a bad woman there. Ein Hexe."

"A witch?" Grey repeated, and felt an odd frisson run down his back, as though someone had touched his nape with a cold finger. "What did this witch look like?"

The child stared back at him, uncomprehending.

"Like a witch," he said.

"Oh," said Grey, momentarily stymied. He rallied, though, and beckoned, curling his fingers at the boy. "Come, then; show me. I am a soldier, I am not afraid of a witch."

"You will kill her and cut out her heart and fry it over the fire?" the boy asked eagerly, peeling himself off the wall. He reached out to touch the hilt of Grey's dagger, still on his belt.

"Well, perhaps," Grey temporized. "Let us go find her first." He grasped the boy under the arms and swung him up; the child came willingly enough, curling his legs around Grey's waist and cuddling close to him for warmth.

The hallway was dark; only a rushlight sputtered in a sconce near the farther end, and the stones emanated a chill that made the child's own warmth more than welcome. Rain was still coming down hard; a small dribble of moisture had seeped in through the shutters at the end of the hall, and the flickering light shone on the puddle.

Thunder boomed in the distance, and the child threw his arms around Grey's neck with a gasp.

"It is all right." Grey patted the small back soothingly, though his own heart had leapt convulsively at the sound. No doubt the sound of the storm had wakened the boy.

"Where is your chamber?"

"Upstairs." The boy pointed vaguely toward the far end of the hallway; presumably there was a back stair somewhere near. The Schloss was immense and sprawling; Grey had learned no more of its geography than what was necessary to reach his own quarters. He hoped that the boy knew the place better, so they were not obliged to wander the chilly hallways all night.

As he approached the end of the hall, the lightning flashed again, a vivid line of white that outlined the window—and showed him clearly that the shutters were unfastened. With the boom of thunder came a gust of wind, and one loose shutter flung back suddenly, admitting a freezing gust of rain.

"Oooh!" The boy clutched him tightly round the neck, nearly choking him.

"It is all right," he said again, as calmly as possible, shifting his burden in order to free one hand.

He leaned out to seize the shutter, trying at the same time to shelter the boy with his body. A soundless flash lit up the world in a burst of black and white, and he blinked, dazzled, a pinwheel of stark images whirling at the back of his eyes. Thunder rolled past, with a sound so like an oxcart full of stones that he glanced up involuntarily, halfexpecting to see one of the old German gods go past, driving gleefully through the clouds.

The image he saw was not of the storm-tossed sky, though, but of something seen when the lightning flashed. He blinked hard, clearing his sight, and then looked down. It was there. A ladder, leaning against the wall of the house. Well, then. Perhaps the child had seen someone strange in his room.

"Here," he said to the boy, turning to set him down. "Stay out of the rain while I fasten the shutter."

He turned back, and leaning out into the storm, pushed the ladder off, so that it fell away into the dark. Then he closed and fastened the shutters, and picked up the shivering boy again. The wind had blown out the rushlight, and he was obliged to feel his way into the turning of the hall.

"It's very dark," said the boy, with a tremor in his voice.

"Soldiers are not afraid of the dark," he reassured the child, thinking of the graveyard.

"I'm not afraid!" The little boy's cheek was pressed against his neck.

"Of course you are not. How are you called, young sir?" he asked, in hopes of distracting the boy.

"Siggy."

"Siggy," he repeated, feeling his way along the wall with one hand. "I am John. Johannes, in your tongue."

"I know," said the boy, surprising him. "The servant girls think you are good-looking. Not so big as Landgrave Stephan, but prettier. Are you rich? The Landgrave is very rich."

"I won't starve," Grey said, wondering how long the blasted hallway was, and whether he might discover the staircase by falling down it in the dark.

At least the boy seemed to have lost some of his fear; he cuddled close, rubbing his head under Grey's chin. There was a distinct smell about him; nothing unpleasant—rather like the smell of a month-old litter of puppies, Grey thought, warmly animal.

Something occurred to him then, something he should have thought to ask at once.

"Where is your nurse?" A boy of this age would surely not sleep alone.

"I don't know. Maybe the witch ate her."

This cheering suggestion coincided with a welcome flicker of light

in the distance, and the sound of voices. Hastening toward these, Grey at last found the nursery stair, just as a wild-eyed woman in nightgown, cap, and shawl popped out, holding a pottery candlestick.

"Siegfried!" she cried. "Master Siggy, where have you been? What has—Oh!" At this point, she realized that Grey was there, and reared back as though struck forcibly in the chest.

"Guten Abend, Madam," he said, politely. "Is this your nurse, Siggy?"

"No," said Siggy, scornful of such ignorance. "That's just Hetty. Mama's maid."

"Siggy? Siegfried, is it you? Oh, my boy, my boy!" The light from above dimmed as a fluttering body hurtled down the stair, and the Princess von Lowenstein seized the boy from his arms, hugging her son and kissing him so passionately that his nightcap fell off.

More servants were coming downstairs, less precipitously. Two footmen and a woman who might be a parlor maid, all in varying degrees of undress, but equipped with candles or rushlights. Evidently, Grey had had the good fortune to encounter a search party.

There was a good deal of confused conversation, as Grey's attempt at explanation was interrupted by Siggy's own rather disjointed account of his adventures, punctuated by exclamations of horror and surprise from the princess and Hetty.

"Witch?" the princess was saying, looking down at her son in alarm. "You saw a witch? Did you have an evil dream, child?"

"No. I just woke up and there was a witch in my room. Can I have some marzipan?"

"Perhaps it would be a good idea to search the house," Grey managed to get in. "It is possible that the ... witch ... is still inside."

The princess had very fine, pale skin, radiant in the candlelight, but at this, it went a sickly color, like toadstools. Grey glanced meaningfully at Siggy, and the princess at once gave the child to Hetty, telling the maid to take him to his nursery.

"Tell me what is happening," she said, gripping Grey's arm, and he did, finishing the account with a question of his own.

"The child's nurse? Where is she?"

"We don't know. I went to the nursery to look at Siegfried before retiring—" The princess's hand fluttered to her bosom, as she became aware that she was wearing a rather unbecoming woolen nightgown and cap, with a heavy shawl and thick, fuzzy stockings. "He wasn't there; neither was the nurse. Jakob, Thomas—" She turned to the

footmen, suddenly taking charge. "Search! The house first, then the grounds."

A distant rumbling of thunder reminded everyone that it was still pouring with rain outside, but the footmen vanished with speed.

The sudden silence left in the wake of their departure gave Grey a slightly eerie feeling, as though the thick stone walls had moved subtly closer. A solitary candle burned, left behind on the stairs.

"Who would do this?" said the princess, her voice suddenly small and frightened. "Did they mean to take Siegfried? Why?"

It looked very much to Grey as though kidnapping had been the plan; no other possibility had entered his mind, until the princess seized him by the arm again.

"Do you think—do you think it was ... her?" she whispered, eyes dilated to pools of horror. "The succubus?"

"I think not," Grey said, taking hold of her hands for reassurance. They were cold as ice—hardly surprising, in view of the temperature inside the Schloss. He smiled at her, squeezing her fingers gently. "A succubus would not require a ladder, surely?" He forbore to add that a boy of Siggy's age was unlikely to have much that a succubus would want, if he had correctly understood the nature of such a creature.

A little color came back into the princess's face, as she saw the logic in this.

"No, that's true." The edge of her mouth twitched in an attempt at a smile, though her eyes were still fearful.

"It might be advisable to set a guard near your son's room," Grey suggested. "Though I expect the ... person ... has been frightened off by now."

She shuddered, whether from cold or at the thought of roving intruders, he couldn't tell. Still, she was clearly steadier at the thought of action, and that being so, he rather reluctantly took the opportunity to share with her Sir Peter Hicks's cautions, feeling that perhaps a solid enemy such as the French would be preferable to phantasms and shadowy threats.

"Ha, those frog-eaters," she said, proving his supposition by drawing herself up with a touch of scorn in her voice. "They have tried before, the Schloss to take. They have never done it; they will not do it now." She gestured briefly at the stone walls surrounding them, by way of justification in this opinion. "My husband's great-great-grandfather built the Schloss; we have a well inside the house, a stable, food stores. This place was built to withstand siege."

"I am sure you are right," Grey said, smiling. "But you will perhaps take some care?" He let go her hands, willing her to draw the interview to a close. Excitement over, he was very much aware that it had been a long day, and that he was freezing.

"I will," she promised him. She hesitated a moment, not quite sure how to take her leave gracefully, then stepped forward, rose onto her toes, and with her hands on his shoulders, kissed him on the mouth.

"Good night, Lord John," she said softly, in English. "Danke." She turned and hurried up the stairs, picking up her skirts as she went.

Grey stood for a startled moment looking after her, the disconcerting feel of her uncorseted breasts still imprinted on his chest. Then shook his head and went to pick up the candlestick she had left on the stair for him.

Straightening up, he was overtaken by a massive yawn, the fatigues of the day coming down upon him like a thousandweight of grapeshot. He only hoped he could find his own chamber again, in this ancient labyrinth. Perhaps he should have asked the princess for direction.

He made his way back down the hallway, his candle flame seeming puny and insignificant in the oppressive darkness cast by the great stone blocks of Schloss Lowenstein. It was only when the light gleamed on the puddle on the floor that the thought suddenly occurred to him: Someone had to have opened the shutters—from the inside.



Grey made his way back as far as the head of the main stair, only to find Stephan von Namtzen coming up it. The Hanoverian was a little flushed with brandy, but still clearheaded, and listened to Grey's account of events with consternation.

"Dreckskerle!" he said, and spat on the floor to emphasize his opinion of kidnappers. "The servants are searching, you say—but you think they will find nothing?"

"Perhaps they will find the nurse," Grey said. "But if the kidnapper has an ally inside the house—and he must ... or she, I suppose," he added. "The boy did say he saw a witch."

"Ja, I see." Von Namtzen looked grim. One big hand fisted at his

side, but then relaxed. "I will perhaps go and speak to the princess. My men, I will have them come to guard the house. If there is a criminal within, he will not get out."

"I'm sure the princess will be grateful." Grey felt all at once terribly tired. "I must take Bodger—the body—back to his regiment in the morning. Oh—in that regard ..." He explained Sir Peter's wishes, to which von Namtzen agreed with a flip of the hand.

"Have you any messages for me to carry, to the troops at the bridge?" Grey asked. "Since I will be going in that direction, anyway." One English regiment lay to the south of the town, the other—Bodger's—to the north, between the town and the river. A small group of the Prussian artillery under Stephan's command was stationed a few miles beyond, guarding the bridge at Aschenwald.

Von Namtzen frowned, thinking, then nodded.

"Ja, you are right. It is best they hear officially of the—" He looked suddenly uneasy, and Grey was slightly amused to see that Stephan did not want to speak the word "succubus."

"Yes, better to avoid rumors," he agreed, saving Stephan's awkwardness. "Speaking of that—do you suppose Herr Blomberg will let the villagers exhume his mother?"

Stephan's broad-boned face broke into a smile at that.

"No," he said. "I think he would make them drive an iron rod through his own heart first. Better, though," he added, the humor fading from his face, "if someone finds who plays these tricks, and a stop to it makes. Quickly."

Stephan was tired, too, Grey saw; his English grammar was slipping. They stood together for a moment, silent, listening to the distant hammer of the rain, both feeling still the chill touch of the graveyard in their bones.

Von Namtzen turned to him suddenly, and put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing.

"You will take care, John," he said, and before Grey could speak or move, Stephan pulled him close and kissed his mouth. Then he smiled, squeezed Grey's shoulder once more, and with a quiet "Gute Nacht," went up the stairs toward his own room.



Grey shut the door of his chamber behind him and leaned against it, in the manner of a man pursued. Tom Byrd, curled up asleep on the hearth rug, sat up and blinked at him.

"Me lord?"

"Who else?" Grey asked, made jocular from the fatigues and excitements of the evening. "Did you expect a visit from the succubus?"

Tom's face lost all its sleepiness at that, and he glanced uneasily at the window, closed and tightly shuttered against the dangers of the night.

"You oughtn't jest that way, me lord," he said reproachfully. "It's an Englishman what's dead now."

"You are right, Tom; I beg pardon of Private Bodger." Grey found some justice in the rebuke, but was too much overtaken by events to be stung by it. "Still, we do not know the cause of his death. Surely there is no proof as yet that it was occasioned by any sort of supernatural interference. Have you eaten?"

"Yes, me lord. Cook had gone to bed, but she got up and fetched us out some bread and dripping, and some ale. Wanting to know all about what I found in the churchyard," he added practically.

Grey smiled to himself, the faint emphasis on "I" in this statement indicating to him that Tom's protests on behalf of the late Private Bodger sprang as much from a sense of proprietariness as from a sense of propriety.

Grey sat down, to let Tom pull off his boots and still-damp stockings. The room he had been given was small, but warm and bright, the shadows from a well-tended fire flickering over striped damask wallpaper. After the wet cold of the churchyard and the bleak chill of the Schloss's stone corridors, the heat upon his skin was a grateful feeling—much enhanced by the discovery of a pitcher of hot water for washing.

"Shall I come with you, me lord? In the morning, I mean." Tom undid the binding of Grey's hair and began to comb it, dipping the comb occasionally in a cologne of bay leaves and hyssop, meant to discourage lice.

"No, I think not. I shall ride over and speak to Colonel Ruysdale first; one of the servants can follow me with the body." Grey closed his eyes, beginning to feel drowsy, though small jolts of excitement still pulsed through his thighs and abdomen. "If you would, Tom, I should like you to talk with the servants; find out what they are

saying about things." God knew, they would have plenty to talk about.

Clean, brushed, warmed, and cozily ensconced in nightshirt, cap, and banyan, Grey dismissed Tom, the valet's arms piled high with filthy uniform bits.

He shut the door behind the boy, and hesitated, staring into the polished surface of the wood as though to look through it and see who might be standing on the other side. Only the blur of his own face met his gaze, though, and only the creak of Tom's footsteps were audible, receding down the corridor.

Thoughtfully, he touched his lips with a finger. Then he sighed, and bolted the door.

Stephan had kissed him before—kissed innumerable people, for that matter; the man was an inveterate *embrasseur*. But surely this had been somewhat more than the fraternal embrace of a fellow soldier. He could still feel the grip of Stephan's hand curled around his leg. Or was he deluded by fatigue and distraction, imagining more to it than there was?

And if he were right?

He shook his head, took the warming pan from his sheets, and crawled between them, reflecting that, of all the men in Gundwitz that night, he at least was safe from the attentions of any roving succubi.

Chapter 3



A Remedy for Sleeplessness

Regimental headquarters for the 52nd was in Bonz, a small hamlet that stood some ten miles from Gundwitz. Grey found Colonel Ruysdale in the central room of the largest inn, in urgent conference with several other officers, and indisposed to take time to deal with an enlisted body.

"Grey? Oh, yes, know your brother. You found what? Where? Yes, all right. See ... um ... Sergeant-Major Sapp. Yes, that's it. Sapp will know who ..." The colonel waved a vague hand, indicating that Grey would doubtless find whatever assistance he required elsewhere.

"Yes, sir," Grey said, settling his bootheels into the sawdust. "I shall do so directly. Am I to understand, though, that there are developments of which our allies should be informed?"

Ruysdale stared at him, eyes cold and upper lip foremost.

"Who told you that, sir?"

As though he needed telling. Troops were being mustered outside the village, drummers beating the call to arms and corporals shouting through the streets, men pouring out from their quarters like an anthill stirred with a stick.

"I am a liaison officer, sir, seconded to Captain von Namtzen's Hanoverian Foot," Grey replied, evading the question. "They are at present quartered in Gundwitz; will you require their support?"

Ruysdale looked grossly offended at the notion, but a captain wearing an artillery cockade coughed tactfully.

"Colonel, shall I give Major Grey such particulars of the situation as may seem useful? You have important matters to deal with ..." He nodded round at the assembled officers, who seemed attentive, but hardly on the brink of action.

The colonel snorted briefly and made a gesture somewhere between gracious dismissal and the waving-away of some noxious insect, and Grey bowed, murmuring, "Your servant, sir."

Outside, the clouds of last night's storm were making a hasty exodus, scudding away on a fresh, cold wind. The artillery captain clapped a hand to his hat, and jerked his head toward a pothouse down the street.

"A bit of warmth, Major?"

Gathering that the village was in no danger of imminent invasion, Grey nodded, and accompanied his new companion into a dark, smoky womb smelling of pigs' feet and fermented cabbage.

"Benjamin Hiltern," the captain said, putting back his cloak and holding up two fingers to the barman. "You'll take a drink, Major?"

"John Grey. I thank you. I collect we shall have time to drink it, before we are quite overrun?"

Hiltern laughed, and sat down across from Grey, rubbing a knuckle under a cold-reddened nose.

"We should have time for our gracious host"—he nodded at the wizened creature fumbling with a jug—"to hunt a boar, roast it, and serve it up with an apple in its mouth, if you should be so inclined."

"I am obliged, Captain," Grey said, with a glance at the barman, who upon closer inspection appeared to have only one leg, the other being supported by a stout peg of battered aspect. "Alas, I have breakfasted but recently."

"Too bad. I haven't. *Bratkartoffeln mit Ruhrei*," Hiltern said to the barman, who nodded and disappeared into some still-more-squalid den to the rear of the house. "Potatoes, fried with eggs and ham," he explained, taking out a kerchief and tucking it into the neck of his shirt. "Delicious."

"Quite," Grey said politely. "One would hope that your troops are fed as well, after the effort I saw being expended."

"Oh, that." Hiltern's cherubic countenance lost a little of its cheerfulness, but not much. "Poor sods. At least it's stopped raining."

In answer to Grey's raised brows, he explained.

"Punishment. There was a game of bowls yesterday, between a party of men from Colonel Bampton-Howard's lot and our lads—local form of skittles. Ruysdale had a heavy wager on with Bampton-Howard, see?"

"And your lot lost. Yes, I see. So your lads are—"

"Ten mile run to the river and back, in full kit. Keep them fit and out of trouble, at least," Hiltern said, half-closing his eyes and lifting his nose at the scent of frying potatoes that had begun to waft through the air.

"I see. One assumes that the French have moved, then? Our last intelligence reported them as being a few miles north of the river."

"Yes, gave us a bit of excitement for a day or two; thought they might come this way. They seem to have sheered off, though—gone round to the west."

"Why?" Grey felt a prickle of unease go down his spine. There was a bridge at Aschenwald, a logical crossing point—but there was another several miles west, at Gruneberg. The eastern bridge was defended by a company of Prussian artillery; a detachment of grenadiers, under Colonel Bampton-Howard, presumably held the western crossing.

"There's a mass of Frenchies beyond the river," Hiltern replied. "We think they have it in mind to join up with that lot."

That was interesting. It was also information that should have been shared with the Hanoverian and Prussian commanders by official dispatch—not acquired accidentally by the random visit of a liaison officer. Sir Peter Hicks was scrupulous in maintaining communications with the allies; Ruysdale evidently saw no such need.

"Oh!" Hiltern said, divining his thought. "I'm sure we would have let you know, only for things here being in a bit of confusion. And truly, it didn't seem urgent; scouts just said the French were shining their gear, biffing up the supplies, that sort of thing. After all, they've got to go *somewhere* before the snow comes down."

He raised one dark brow, smiling in apology—an apology that Grey accepted, with no more than a second's hesitation. If Ruysdale was going to be erratic about dispatches, it would be as well for Grey to keep himself informed by other means—and Hiltern was obviously well-placed to know what was going on.

They chatted casually until the host came out with Hiltern's breakfast, but Grey learned no more of interest—save that Hiltern was remarkably *un*interested in the death of Private Bodger. He was also vague about the "confusion" to which he had referred, dismissing it with a wave of the hand as a "bit of a muddle in the commissary—damned bore."

The sound of hooves and wheels, moving slowly, came from the street outside, and Grey heard a loud voice with a distinctly Hanoverian accent, requesting direction "Zum Englanderlager."

"What is that?" Hiltern asked, turning on his stool.

"I expect that will be Private Bodger coming home," Grey replied,

rising. "I'm obliged to you, sir. Is Sergeant-Major Sapp still in camp, do you know?"

"Mmm ... no." Hiltern spoke thickly, through a mouthful of potatoes and eggs. "Gone to the river."

That was inconvenient; Grey had no desire to hang about all day, waiting for Sapp's return in order to hand over the corpse and responsibility for it. Another idea occurred to him, though.

"And the regimental surgeon?"

"Dead. Flux." Hiltern spooned in more egg, concentrating. "Mmp. Try Keegan. He's the surgeon's assistant."



With most of the men emptying out of camp, it took some time to locate the surgeon's tent. Once there, Grey had the body deposited on a bench, and at once sent the wagon back to the Schloss. He was taking no chances on being left in custody of Private Bodger.

Keegan proved to be a scrappy Welshman, equipped with rimless spectacles and an incongruous mop of reddish ringlets. Blinking through the spectacles, he bent close to the corpse and poked at it with a smudgy exploratory finger.

"No blood."

"No."

"Fever?"

"Probably not. I saw the man several hours before his death, and he seemed in reasonable health then."

"Hmmm." Keegan bent and peered keenly up Bodger's nostrils, as though suspecting the answer to the private's untimely death might be lurking there.

Grey frowned at the fellow's grubby knuckles and the thin crust of blood that rimmed his cuff. Nothing out of the way for a surgeon, but the dirt bothered him.

Keegan tried to thumb up one of the eyelids, but it resisted him. Bodger had stiffened during the night, and while the hands and arms had gone limp again, the face, body, and legs were all hard as wood. Keegan sighed and began tugging off the corpse's stockings. These were greatly the worse for wear, the soles stained with mud; the left one had a hole worn through and Bodger's great toe poked out like

the head of an inquisitive worm.

Keegan rubbed a hand on the skirt of his already grubby coat, leaving further streaks, then rubbed it under his nose, sniffing loudly. Grey had an urge to step away from the man. Then he realized, with a small sense of startlement mingled with annoyance, that he was thinking of the Woman. Fraser's wife. Fraser had spoken of her very little—but that reticence only added to the significance of what he *did* say.

One late night, in the governor's quarters at Ardsmuir Prison, they had sat longer than usual over their chess game—a hard-fought draw, in which Grey took more pleasure than he might have taken in victory over a lesser opponent. They usually drank sherry, but not that night; he had a special claret, a present from his mother, and had insisted that Fraser must help him to finish it, as the wine would not last once opened.

It was a strong wine, and between the headiness of it and the stimulation of the game, even Fraser had lost a little of his formidable reserve.

Past midnight, Grey's orderly had come to take away the dishes from their repast, and stumbling sleepily on the threshold in his leaving, had sprawled full-length, cutting himself badly on a shard of glass. Fraser had leapt up like a cat, snatched the boy up, and pressed a fold of his shirt to the wound to stop the bleeding. But then, when Grey would have sent for a surgeon, Fraser had stopped him, saying tersely that Grey could do so if he wished to kill the lad, but if not, had best allow Fraser to tend him.

This he had done with great skill and gentleness, washing first his hands, and then the wound, with wine, then demanding needle and silk thread—which he had astonished Grey by dipping into the wine, as well, and passing the needle through the flame of a candle.

"My wife would do it so," he'd said, frowning slightly in concentration. "There are the wee beasties, called germs, d'ye see, and if they—" He set his teeth momentarily into his lip as he made the first stitch, then went on.

"—If they should be getting into a wound, it will suppurate. So ye must wash well before ye tend the wound, and put flame or alcohol to your instruments, to kill them." He smiled briefly at the orderly, who was white-faced and wobbling on his stool. "Never let a surgeon wi' dirty hands touch ye, she said. Better to bleed to death quickly than die slow of the pus, aye?"

Grey was as skeptical of the existence of germs as of succubi, but ever afterward had glanced automatically at the hands of any medical man—and it did seem to him that perhaps the more cleanly of the breed tended to lose fewer patients, though he had made no real study of the matter.

In the present instance, though, Mr. Keegan offered no hazard to the late Private Bodger, and in spite of his distaste, Grey made no protest as the surgeon undressed the corpse, making small interested "Tut!" noises in response to the postmortem phenomena thus revealed.

Grey was already aware that the private had died in a state of arousal. This state appeared to be permanent, even though the limbs had begun to relax from their rigor, and was the occasion of a surprised "Tut!" from Mr. Keegan.

"Well, he died happy, at least," Keegan said, blinking. "Sweet God almighty."

"Is this a ... normal manifestation, do you think?" Grey inquired. He had rather expected Private Bodger's condition to abate postmortem. If anything, it seemed particularly pronounced, viewed by daylight. Though of course that might be merely an artifact of the color, which was now a virulent dark purple, in stark contrast to the pallid flesh of the body.

Keegan prodded the condition cautiously with a forefinger.

"Stiff as wood," he said, unnecessarily. "Normal? Don't know. Mind, what chaps I see here have mostly died of fever or flux, and men what are ill aren't mostly of a mind to ... Hmm." He relapsed into a thoughtful contemplation of the body.

"What did the woman say?" he asked, shaking himself out of this reverie after a moment or two.

"Who, the woman he was with? Gone. Not that one might blame her." Always assuming that it had been a woman, he added to himself. Though given Private Bodger's earlier encounter with the gypsy, one *would* assume ...

"Can you say what caused his death?" Grey inquired, seeing that Keegan had begun to inspect the body as a whole, though his fascinated gaze kept returning to ... Color notwithstanding, it really was remarkable.

The assistant surgeon shook his ringlets, absorbed in wrestling off the corpse's shirt.

"No wound that I can see. Blow to the head, perhaps?" He bent

close, squinting at the corpse's head and face, poking here and there in an exploratory fashion.

A group of men in uniform came toward them at the trot, hastily doing up straps and buttons, hoicking packs and muskets into place, and cursing as they went. Grey removed his hat and placed it strategically abaft the corpse, not wishing to excite public remark—but no one bothered to spare a glance at the tableau by the surgeon's tent; one dead man was much like another.

Grey reclaimed his hat and watched them go, grumbling like a miniature thunderstorm on the move. Most of the troops were already massed on the parade ground. He could see them in the distance, moving in a slow, disorderly mill that would snap into clean formation at the sergeant-major's shout.

"I know Colonel Ruysdale by reputation," Grey said, after a thoughtful pause, "though not personally. I have heard him described as 'a bit of a Gawd-'elp-us,' but I have not heard that he is altogether an ass."

Keegan smiled, keeping his eyes on his work.

"Shouldn't think he is," he agreed. "Not altogether."

Grey kept an inviting silence, to which invitation the surgeon acquiesced within moments.

"He means to wear them out, see. Bring them back so tired they fall asleep in their suppers."

"Oh, yes?"

"They been a-staying up all night, you see? Nobody wanting to fall asleep, lest the thing—a sucky-bus, is it?—should come round in their dreams. Mind, it's good for the tavern owners, but not so good for discipline, what with men falling asleep on sentry-go, or in the midst of drill...."

Keegan glanced up from his inspections, observing Grey with interest.

"Not sleeping so well yourself, Major?" He tapped a dirty finger beneath his eye, indicating the presence of dark rings, and chuckled.

"I kept rather late hours last night, yes," Grey replied equably. "Owing to the discovery of Private Bodger."

"Hmm. Yes, I see," Keegan said, straightening up. "Seems as though the sucky-bus had her fill of him, then."

"So you do know about the rumors of a succubus?" Grey asked, ignoring the attempt at badinage.

"Of course I do." Keegan looked surprised. "Everybody knows.

Aren't I just telling you?"

Keegan did not know how the rumor had reached the encampment, but it had spread like wildfire, reaching every man in camp within twenty-four hours. Original scoffing had become skeptical attention, and then reluctant belief, as more stories began to circulate of the dreams and torments suffered by men in the town—and had become outright panic, with the news of the Hanoverian soldier's death.

"I don't suppose you saw that body?" Grey asked, interested.

The Welshman shook his head. "The word is that the poor bugger was drained of blood—but who's to know the truth of it? Perhaps it was an apoplexy; I've seen 'em taken so, sometimes—the blood comes bursting from the nose, so as to relieve the pressure on the brain. Messy enough to look at."

"You seem a rational man, sir," Grey said, in compliment.

Keegan gave a small, huffing sort of laugh, dismissing it, and straightened up, brushing his palms once more against his coat skirts.

"Deal with soldiers for as long as I have, Major, and you get used to wild stories, that's all I can say. Men in camp, 'specially. Not enough to keep them busy, and a good tale will spread like butter on hot toast. And when it comes to dreams ...!" He threw up his hands.

Grey nodded, acknowledging the truth of this. Soldiers put great store in dreams involving Jamie Fraser. A faint warmth in the belly reminded him of one of his own dreams, but he put the memory firmly aside.

"So you can tell me nothing regarding the cause of Private Bodger's death?"

Keegan shook his head, scratching at a row of fleabites on his neck as he did so.

"Don't see a thing, sir, I'm sorry to say. Other than the ... um ... obvious." He nodded delicately toward the corpse's midregion. "And that's not generally fatal. You might ask the fellow's friends, though. Just in case."

This cryptic allusion made Grey glance up in question, and Keegan coughed.

"I did say the men didn't sleep, sir? Not wanting to give any suckybus an invitation, so to speak. Well, some went a bit further than that, and took matters—so to speak—into their own hands."

A few bold souls, Keegan said, had reasoned that if what the succubus desired was the male essence, safety lay in removing this temptation—"so to speak, sir." While most of those choosing this

expedient had presumably chosen to take their precautions in privacy, the men lived in very close quarters. It was in fact complaints from more than one citizen of gross mass indecency by the soldiers quartered on his premises that had provoked Colonel Ruysdale's edict.

"Only thinking, sir, as a wet graveyard is maybe not the place I'd choose for romance, was the opportunity to come my way. But I could see, maybe, a group of men thinking they'd face down the sucky-bus on her own ground, perhaps? And if Private ... Bodger, you said was his name, sir?... was to have keeled over in the midst of such proceedings ... well, I expect his comrades would have buggered off smartly, not hung about to answer questions."

"You have a very interesting turn of mind, Mr. Keegan," Grey said. "Highly rational. I don't suppose it was you who suggested this particular ... precaution?"

"Who, me?" Keegan tried—and failed—to exhibit outrage. "The idea, Major!"

"Quite," Grey said, and took his leave.

In the distance, the troops were departing the parade ground in orderly fashion, each rank setting off in turn, to the clank and rattle of canteens and muskets and the staccato cries of corporals and sergeants. He stopped for a moment to watch them, enjoying the warmth of the autumn sun on his back.

After the fury of the night's storm, the day had dawned clear and calm, and promised to be mild. Very muddy underfoot, though, he noted, seeing the churned earth of the parade ground and the spray of clods flying off the feet of the runners, spattering their breeches. It would be heavy going, and the devil of a sweat to clean up afterward. Ruysdale might not have intended this exercise principally as punishment, but that's what it would be.

Artilleryman that he had been, Grey automatically evaluated the quality of the terrain for the passage of caissons. Not a chance. The ground was soft as sodden cheese. Even the mortars would bog down in nothing flat.

He turned, eyeing the distant hills where the French were said to be. If they had cannon, chances were that they were going nowhere for the moment.

The situation still left him with a lingering sense of unease, loath though he was to admit it. Yes, the French likely were intending to move toward the north. No, there was no apparent reason for them to cross the valley; Gundwitz had no strategic importance, nor was it of sufficient size to be worth a detour to loot. Yes, Billman's troops were between the French and the town. But he looked at the deserted parade ground, and the troops vanishing in the distance, and felt a tickle between the shoulder blades, as though someone stood behind him with a loaded pistol.

I should feel happier if a few more of Ruysdale's troops were to move to defend the bridge. Hicks's words echoed in memory. So Sir Peter felt that itch, as well. It was possible, Grey reflected, that Ruysdale was an ass.

Chapter 4



The Gun Crew

It was past midday by the time he reached the river. From a distance, it was a tranquil landscape under a high, pale sun, the river bordered by a thick growth of trees in autumn leaf, their ancient golds and bloody reds a-shimmer, in contrast to the black-and-dun patchwork of fallow fields and meadows gone to seed.

A little closer, though, and the river itself dispelled this impression of pastoral charm. It was a broad, deep stream, turbulent and fast-moving, much swollen by the recent rains. Even at a distance, he could see the tumbling forms of up rooted trees and bushes, and the occasional carcass of a small animal, drowned in the current.

The Prussian artillery were placed upon a small rise of ground, concealed in a copse. Only one ten-pounder, he saw, with a sense of unease, and a small mortar—though there were sufficient stores of shot and powder, and these were commendably well-kept, with a Prussian sense of order, tidily sheltered under canvas against the rain.

The men greeted him with great cordiality; any diversion from the boredom of bridge-guarding was welcome—the more welcome if it came bearing beer, which Grey did, having thoughtfully procured two large ale skins before leaving camp.

"You will with us eat, Major," said the Hanoverian lieutenant in charge, accepting both beer and dispatches, and waving a gracious hand toward a convenient boulder.

It was a long time since breakfast, and Grey accepted the invitation with pleasure. He took off his coat and spread it over the boulder, rolled up his sleeves, and joined companionably in the hard biscuit, cheese, and beer, accepting with gratitude a few bites of chewy, spicy sausage, as well.

Lieutenant Dietrich, a middle-aged gentleman with a luxuriant beard and eyebrows to match, opened the dispatches and read them while Grey practiced his German with the gun crew. He kept a careful eye upon the lieutenant as he chatted, though, curious to see what the artilleryman would make of von Namtzen's dispatch.

The lieutenant's eyebrows were an admirable indication of his interior condition; they remained level for the first moments of reading, then rose to an apex of astonishment, where they remained suspended for no little time, returning to their original position with small flutters of dismay, as the lieutenant decided how much of this information it was wise to impart to his men.

The lieutenant folded the paper, shooting Grey a sharp interrogative glance. Grey gave a slight nod; yes, he knew what the dispatch said.

The lieutenant glanced round at the men, then back over his shoulder, as though judging the distance across the valley to the British camp and the town beyond. Then he looked back at Grey, thoughtfully chewing his mustache, and shook his head slightly. He would not mention the matter of a succubus.

On the whole, Grey thought that wise, and inclined his head an inch in agreement. There were only ten men present; if any of them had already known of the rumors, all would know. And while the lieutenant seemed at ease with his command, the fact remained that these were Prussians, and not his own men. He could not be sure of their response.

The lieutenant folded away his papers and came to join the conversation. However, Grey observed with interest that the substance of the dispatch seemed to weigh upon the lieutenant's mind, in such a way that the conversation turned—with no perceptible nudge in that direction, but with the inexorable swing of a compass needle—to manifestations of the supernatural.

It being a fine day, with golden leaves drifting gently down around them, the gurgle of the river nearby, and plenty of beer to hand, the varied tales of ghosts, bleeding nuns, and spectral battles in the sky were no more than the stuff of entertainment. In the cold shadows of the night, it would be different—though the stories would still be told. More than cannon shot, bayonets, or disease, boredom was a soldier's greatest enemy.

At one point, though, an artilleryman told the story of a fine house in his town, where the cries of a ghostly child echoed in the rooms at night, to the consternation of the householders. In time, they traced the sound to one particular wall, chipped away the plaster, and discovered a bricked-up chimney, in which lay the remains of a young boy, with the dagger which had cut his throat.

Several of the soldiers made the sign of the horns at this, but Grey

saw distinct expressions of unease on the faces of two of the men. These two exchanged glances, then looked hurriedly away.

"You have heard such a story before, perhaps?" Grey asked, addressing the younger of the two directly. He smiled, doing his best to look harmlessly engaging.

The boy—he could be no more than fifteen—hesitated, but such was the press of interest from those around him that he could not resist.

"Not a story," he said. "I—we"—he nodded at his fellow—"last night, in the storm. We heard a child crying, near the river. We went to look, with a lantern, but there was nothing there. Still, we heard it. It went on and on, though we walked up and down, calling and searching, until we were wet through, and nearly frozen."

"Oh, is that what you were doing?" a fellow in his twenties interjected, grinning. "And here we thought you and Samson were just buggering each other under the bridge."

Blood surged up into the boy's face with a suddenness that made his eyes bulge, and he launched himself at the older man, knocking him off his seat and rolling with him into the leaves in a ball of fists and elbows.

Grey sprang to his feet and kicked them apart, seizing the boy by the scruff of the neck and jerking him up. The lieutenant was shouting at them angrily in idiomatic German, which Grey ignored. He shook the boy slightly, to bring him to his senses, and said, very quietly, "Laugh. It was a joke."

He stared hard into the boy's eyes, willing him to come to his senses. The thin shoulders under his hands vibrated with the need to strike out, to hit something—and the brown eyes were glassy with anguish and confusion.

Grey shook him harder, then released him, and under the guise of slapping dead leaves from his uniform, leaned closer. "If you act like this, they will know," he said, speaking in a rapid whisper. "For God's sake, laugh!"

Samson, experienced enough to know what to do in such circumstances, was doing it—pushing at joking comrades, replying to crude jests with cruder ones. The young boy glanced at him, a flicker of awareness coming back into his face. Grey let him go, and turned back to the group, saying loudly, "If I were going to bugger someone, I would wait for good weather. A man must be desperate, to swive *anything* in such rain and thunder!"

"It's been a long time, Major," said one of the soldiers, laughing. He made crude thrusting gestures with his hips. "Even a sheep in a snowstorm would look good now!"

"Haha. Go fuck yourself, Wulfie. The sheep wouldn't have you." The boy was still flushed and damp-eyed, but back in control of himself. He rubbed a hand across his mouth and spat, forcing a grin as the others laughed.

"You *could* fuck yourself, Wulfie—if your dick is as long as you say it is." Samson leered at Wulf, who stuck out an amazingly long tongue in reply, waggling it in derision.

"Don't you wish you knew!"

The discussion was interrupted at this point by two soldiers who came puffing up the rise, wet to the waist and dragging with them a large dead pig, fished out of the river. This addition to supper was greeted with cries of approbation, and half the men fell at once to the work of butchery, the others returning in desultory fashion to their conversation.

The vigor had gone out of it, though, and Grey was about to take his leave, when one of the men said something, laughing, about gypsy women.

"What did you say? I mean—was ist das Du hast sprechen?" He groped for his German. "Gypsies? You have seen them recently?"

"Oh, *ja*, Major," said the soldier obligingly. "This morning. They came across the bridge, six wagons with mules. They go back and forth. We've seen them before."

With a little effort, Grey kept his voice calm.

"Indeed?" He turned to the lieutenant. "Does it not seem possible that they may have dealings with the French?"

"Of course." The lieutenant looked mildly surprised, then grinned. "What are they going to tell the French? That we're here? I think they know that, Major."

He gestured toward a gap in the trees. Through it, Grey could see the English soldiers of Ruysdale's regiment, perhaps a mile away, their ranks piling up on the bank of the river like driftwood as they flung down their packs and waded into the shallows to drink, hot and mudcaked from their run.

It was true; the presence of the English and Hanoverian regiments could be a surprise to no one; anyone on the cliffs with a spyglass could likely count the spots on Colonel Ruysdale's dog. As for information regarding their movements ... well, since neither

Ruysdale nor Hicks had any idea where they were going or when, there wasn't any great danger of that intelligence being revealed to the enemy.

He smiled, and took gracious leave of the lieutenant, though privately resolving to speak to Stephan von Namtzen. Perhaps the gypsies were harmless—but they should be looked into. If nothing else, the gypsies were in a position to tell anyone who cared to ask them how few men were guarding that bridge. And somehow, he thought that Ruysdale was not of a mind to consider Sir Peter's request for reinforcement.

He waved casually to the artillerymen, who took little notice, elbow-deep in blood and pig guts. The boy was by himself, chopping green wood for the spit.

Leaving the artillery camp, he rode up to the head of the bridge and paused, reining Karolus in as he looked across the river. The land was flat for a little way, but then broke into rolling hills. Above, on the cliffs, the French presumably still lurked. He took a small spyglass from his pocket, and scanned the clifftops, slowly. Nothing moved on the heights; no horses, no men, no swaying banners—and yet a faint gray haze drifted up there, a cloud in an otherwise cloudless sky. The smoke of campfires; many of them. Yes, the French were still there.

He scanned the hills below, looking carefully—but if the gypsies were there, as well, no rising plume of smoke betrayed their presence.

He should find the gypsy camp and question its inhabitants himself—but it was growing late, and he had no stomach for that now. He reined about and turned the horse's head back toward the distant town, not glancing at the copse that hid the cannon and its crew.

The boy had best learn—and quickly—to hide his nature, or he would become in short order bumboy to any man who cared to use him. And many would. Wulf had been correct; after months in the field, soldiers were not particular, and the boy was much more appealing than a sheep, with those soft red lips and tender skin.

Karolus tossed his head, and he slowed, uneasy. Grey's hands were trembling on the reins, gripped far too tightly. He forced them to relax, stilled the trembling, and spoke calmly to the horse, nudging him back to speed.

He had been attacked once, in camp somewhere in Scotland, in the days after Culloden. Someone had come upon him in the dark, and taken him from behind with an arm across his throat. He had thought he was dead, but his assailant had something else in mind. The man

had never spoken, and was brutally swift about his business, leaving him moments later, curled in the dirt behind a wagon, speechless with shock and pain.

He had never known who it was: officer, soldier, or some anonymous intruder. Never known whether the man had discerned something in his own appearance or behavior that led to the attack, or had only taken him because he was there.

He *had* known the danger of telling anyone about it. He washed himself, stood straight and walked firmly, spoke normally and looked men in the eye. No one had suspected the bruised and riven flesh beneath his uniform, or the hollowness beneath his breastbone. And if his attacker sat at meals and broke bread with him, he had not known it. From that day, he had carried a dagger at all times, and no one had ever touched him again against his will.

The sun was sinking behind him, and the shadow of horse and rider stretched out far before him, flying, and faceless in their flight.

Chapter 5



Dark Dreams

Once more he was late for dinner. This time, though, a tray was brought for him, and he sat in the drawing room, taking his supper while the rest of the company chatted.

The princess saw to his needs, and sat with him for a time, flatteringly attentive. He was worn out from a day of riding, though, and his answers to her questions brief. Soon enough, she drifted away and left him to a peaceful engagement with some cold venison and a tart of dried apricots.

He had nearly finished, when he felt a large, warm hand on his shoulder.

"So, you have seen the gun crew at the bridge? They are in good order?" von Namtzen asked.

"Yes, very good," Grey replied. No point—not yet—in mentioning the young soldier to von Namtzen. "I told them more men will come, from Ruysdale's regiment."

"The bridge?" The dowager, catching the word, turned from her conversation, frowning. "You have no need to worry, Landgrave. The bridge is safe."

"I am sure it will be safe, madam," Stephan said, clicking his heels gallantly as he bowed to the old lady. "You may be assured, Major Grey and I will protect you."

The old lady looked faintly put out at the notion.

"The bridge is safe," she repeated, touching the religious medal on the bodice of her gown, and glancing pugnaciously from man to man. "No enemy has crossed the bridge at Aschenwald in five hundred years. No enemy will ever cross it!"

Stephan glanced at Grey, and cleared his throat slightly. Grey cleared his own throat and made a gracious compliment upon the food.

When the dowager had moved away, Stephan shook his head behind her back, and exchanged a brief smile with Grey.

"You know about that bridge?"

"No, is there something odd about it?"

"Only a story." Von Namtzen shrugged, with a tolerant scorn for the superstition of others. "They say that there is a guardian, a spirit of some kind that defends the bridge."

"Indeed," Grey said, with an uneasy memory of the stories told by the gun crew stationed near the bridge. Were any of them local men, he wondered, who would know the story?

"Mein Gott," Stephan said, shaking his massive head as though assailed by gnats. "These stories! How can sane men believe such things?"

"I collect you do not mean that particular story?" Grey said. "The succubus, perhaps?"

"Don't speak to me of that thing," von Namtzen said gloomily. "My men look like scarecrows and jump at a bird's shadow. Every one of them is scared to lay his head upon a pillow, for fear that he will turn it and look into the night hag's face."

"Your chaps aren't the only ones." Sir Peter had come to pour himself another drink. He lifted the glass and took a deep swallow, shuddering slightly. Billman, behind him, nodded in glum confirmation.

"Bloody sleepwalkers, the lot."

"Ah," said Grey thoughtfully. "If I might make a suggestion ... not my own, you understand. A notion mentioned by Ruysdale's surgeon ..."

He explained Mr. Keegan's remedy, keeping his voice discreetly low. His listeners were less discreet in their response.

"What, Ruysdale's chaps are all boxing the Jesuit and begetting cockroaches?" Grey thought Sir Peter would expire from suffocated laughter. Just as well Lieutenant Dundas wasn't present, he thought.

"Perhaps not all of them," he said. "Evidently enough, though, to be of concern. I take it you have not experienced a similar phenomenon among your troops ... yet?"

Billman caught the delicate pause and whooped loudly.

"Boxing the Jesuit?" Stephan nudged Grey with an elbow, and raised thick blond brows in puzzlement. "Cockroaches? What does this mean, please?"

"Ahhh ..." Having no notion of the German equivalent of this

expression, Grey resorted to a briefly graphic gesture with one hand, looking over his shoulder to be sure that none of the women was watching.

"Oh!" Von Namtzen looked mildly startled, but then grinned widely. "I see, yes, very good!" He nudged Grey again, more familiarly, and dropped his voice a little. "Perhaps wise to take some such precaution personally, do you think?"

The women and the German officers, heretofore intent on a card game, were looking toward the Englishmen in puzzlement. One man called a question to von Namtzen, and Grey was fortunately saved from reply.

Something occurred to him, though, and he grasped von Namtzen by the arm, as the latter was about to go and join the others at a hand of favo.

"A moment, Stephan. I had meant to ask—that man of yours who died—Koenig? Did you see the body yourself?"

Von Namtzen was still smiling, but at this, his expression grew more somber, and he shook his head.

"No, I did not see him. They said, though, that his throat was most terribly torn—as though a wild animal had been at him. And yet he was not outside; he was found in his quarters." He shook his head again, and left to join the card game.

Grey finished his meal amid cordial conversation with Sir Peter and Billman, though keeping an inconspicuous eye upon the progress of the card game.

Stephan was in dress uniform tonight. A smaller man would have been overwhelmed by it; Hanoverian taste in military decoration was grossly excessive, to an English eye. Still, with his big frame and leonine blond head, the Landgrave von Erdberg was merely ... eyecatching.

He appeared to have caught the eye not only of the Princess Louisa, but of three other young women. These surrounded him like a moony triplet, caught in his orbit. Now he reached into the breast of his coat and withdrew some small object, causing them to cluster round to look at it.

Grey turned to answer some question of Billman's, but then turned back, trying not to look too obviously.

He had been trying to suppress the feeling Stephan roused in him, but in the end, such things were never controllable—they rose up. Sometimes like the bursting of a mortar shell, sometimes like the

inexorable green spike of a crocus pushing through snow and ice—but they rose up.

Was he in love with Stephan? There was no question of that. He liked and respected the Hanoverian, but there was no madness in it, no yearning. Did he *want* Stephan? A soft warmth in his loins, as though his blood had begun somehow to simmer over a low flame, suggested that he did.

The ancient bear's skull still sat in its place of honor, below the old prince's portrait. He moved slowly to examine it, keeping half an eye on Stephan.

"Surely you have not eaten enough, John!" A delicate hand on his elbow turned him, and he looked down into the princess's face smiling up at him with pretty coquetry. "A strong man, out all day—let me call the servants to bring you something special."

"I assure you, Your Highness ..." But she would have none of it, and tapping him playfully with her fan, she scudded away like a gilded cloud, to have some special dessert prepared for him.

Feeling obscurely like a fatted calf being readied for the slaughter, Grey sought refuge in male company, coming to rest beside von Namtzen, who was folding up whatever he had been showing to the women, who had all gone to peer over the card player's shoulders and make bets.

"What is that?" Grey asked, nodding at the object.

"Oh—" Von Namtzen looked a little disconcerted at the question, but with only a moment's hesitation, handed it to Grey. It was a small leather case, hinged, with a gold closure. "My children."

It was a miniature, done by an excellent hand. The heads of two children, close together, one boy, one girl, both blond. The boy, clearly a little older, was perhaps three or four.

Grey felt momentarily as though he had received an actual blow to the pit of the stomach; his mouth opened, but he was incapable of speech. Or at least he thought he was. To his surprise, he heard his own voice, sounding calm, politely admiring.

"They are very handsome indeed. I am sure they are a consolation to your wife, in your absence."

Von Namtzen grimaced slightly, and gave a brief shrug.

"Their mother is dead. She died in childbirth when Elise was born." A huge forefinger touched the tiny face, very gently. "My mother looks after them."

Grey made the proper sounds of condolence, but had ceased to hear

himself, for the confusion of thought and speculation that filled his mind.

So much so, in fact, that when the princess's special dessert—an enormous concoction of raspberries, brandy, sugar, and cream—arrived, he ate it all, despite the fact that raspberries made him itch.



He continued to think, long after the ladies had left. He joined the card game, bet extensively, and played wildly—winning, with Luck's usual perversity, though he paid no attention to his cards.

Had he been entirely wrong? It was possible. All of Stephan's gestures toward him had been within the bounds of normalcy—and yet ...

And yet it was by no means unknown for men such as himself to marry and have children. Certainly men such as von Namtzen, with a title and estates to bequeath, would wish to have heirs. That thought steadied him, and though he scratched occasionally at chest or neck, he paid more attention to his game—and finally began to lose.

The card game broke up an hour later. Grey loitered a bit, in hopes that Stephan might seek him out, but the Hanoverian was detained in argument with Kaptain Steffens, and at last Grey went upstairs, still scratching.

The halls were well lit tonight, and he found his own corridor without difficulty. He hoped Tom was still awake; perhaps the young valet could fetch him something for itching. Some ointment, perhaps, or—he heard the rustle of fabric behind him, and turned to find the princess approaching him.

She was once again in nightdress—but not the homely woolen garment she had worn the night before. This time, she wore a flowing thing of diaphanous lawn, which clung to her bosom and rather clearly revealed her nipples through the thin fabric. He thought she must be very cold, in spite of the lavishly embroidered robe thrown over the nightgown.

She had no cap, and her hair had been brushed out but not yet plaited for the night; it flowed becomingly in golden waves below her shoulders. Grey began to feel somewhat cold, too, in spite of the brandy. "My Lord," she said. "John," she added, and smiled. "I have something for you." She was holding something in one hand, he saw; a small box of some sort.

"Your Highness," he said, repressing the urge to take a step backward. She was wearing a very strong scent, redolent of tuberoses —a scent he particularly disliked.

"My name is Louisa," she said, taking another step toward him. "Will you not call me by my name? Here, in private?"

"Of course. If you wish it—Louisa." Good God, what had brought this on? He had sufficient experience to see what she was about—he was a handsome man, of good family, and with money; it had happened often enough—but not with royalty, who tended to be accustomed to taking what they wanted.

He took her outstretched hand, ostensibly for the purpose of kissing it; in reality, to keep her at a safe distance. What did she want? And why?

"This is—to thank you," she said, as he raised his head from her beringed knuckles. She thrust the box into his other hand. "And to protect you."

"I assure you, madam, no thanks are necessary. I did nothing." Christ, was that it? Did she think she must bed him, in token of thanks—or rather, had convinced herself that she must, because she wanted to? She did want to; he could see her excitement, in the slightly widened blue eyes, the flushed cheeks, the rapid pulse in her throat. He squeezed her fingers gently and released them, then tried to hand back the box.

"Really, madam—Louisa—I cannot accept this; surely it is a treasure of your family." It certainly looked valuable; small as it was, it was remarkably heavy—made either of gilded lead or of solid gold—and sported a number of crudely cut cabochon stones, which he feared were precious.

"Oh, it is," she assured him. "It has been in my husband's family for hundreds of years."

"Oh, well, then certainly—"

"No, you must keep it," she said vehemently. "It will protect you from the creature."

"Creature. You mean the—"

"Der Nachtmahr," she said, lowering her voice and looking involuntarily over one shoulder, as though fearing that some vile thing hovered in the air nearby.

Nachtmahr. "Nightmare," it meant. Despite himself, a brief shiver tightened Grey's shoulders. The halls were better lighted, but still harbored drafts that made the candles flicker and shadows flow like moving water down the walls.

He glanced down at the box. There were letters etched into the lid, in Latin, but of so ancient a sort that it would take close examination to work out what they said.

"It is a reliquary," she said, moving closer, as though to point out the inscription. "Of St. Orgevald."

"Ah? Er ... yes. Most interesting." He thought this mildly gruesome. Of all the objectionable popish practices, this habit of chopping up saints and scattering their remnants to the far ends of the earth was possibly the most reprehensible.

She was very close, her perfume cloying in his nostrils. How was he to get rid of the woman? The door to his room was only a foot or two away; he had a strong urge to open it, leap in, and slam it shut, but that wouldn't do.

"You will protect me, protect my son," she murmured, looking trustfully up at him from beneath golden lashes. "So I will protect you, dear John."

She flung her arms about his neck, and glued her lips to his in a passionate kiss. Sheer courtesy required him to return the embrace, though his mind was racing, looking feverishly for some escape. Where the devil were the servants? Why did no one interrupt them?

Then someone did interrupt them. There was a gruff cough near at hand, and Grey broke the embrace with relief—a short-lived emotion, as he looked up to discover the Landgrave von Erdberg standing a few feet away, glowering under heavy brows.

"Your pardon, Your Highness," Stephan said, in tones of ice. "I wished to speak to Major Grey; I did not know anyone was here."

The princess was flushed, but quite collected. She smoothed her gown down across her body, drawing herself up in such a way that her fine bust was strongly emphasized.

"Oh," she said, very cool. "It's you, Erdberg. Do not worry, I was just taking my leave of the major. You may have him now." A small, smug smile twitched at the corner of her mouth. Quite deliberately, she laid a hand along Grey's heated cheek, and let her fingers trail along his skin as she turned away. Then she strolled—curse the woman, she *strolled*!—away, switching the tail of her robe.

There was a profound silence in the hallway.

Grey broke it, finally.

"You wished to speak with me, Captain?"

Von Namtzen looked him over coldly, as though deciding whether to step on him.

"No," he said at last. "It will wait." He turned on his heel and strode away, making a good deal more noise in his departure than had the princess.

Grey pressed a hand to his forehead, until he could trust his head not to explode, then shook it, and lunged for the door to his room before anything else should happen.



Tom was sitting on a stool by the fire, mending a pair of breeches that had suffered injury to the seams while Grey was demonstrating saber lunges to one of the German officers. He looked up at once when Grey came in, but if he had heard any of the conversation in the hall, he made no reference to it.

"What's that, me lord?" he asked instead, seeing the box in Grey's hand.

"What? Oh, that." Grey put it down, with a faint feeling of distaste. "A relic. Of St. Orgevald, whoever he might be."

"Oh, I know him!"

"You do?" Grey raised one brow.

"Yes, me lord. There's a little chapel to him, down the garden. Ilse—she's one of the kitchen maids—was showing me. He's right famous hereabouts."

"Indeed." Grey began to undress, tossing his coat across the chair and starting on his waistcoat buttons. His fingers were impatient, slipping on the small buttons. "Famous for what?"

"Stopping them killing the children. Will I help you, me lord?"

"What?" Grey stopped, staring at the young valet, then shook his head and resumed twitching buttons. "No, continue. Killing what children?"

Tom's hair was standing up on end, as it tended to do whenever he was interested in a subject, owing to his habit of running one hand through it.

"Well, d'ye see, me lord, it used to be the custom, when they'd build

something important, they'd buy a child from the gypsies—or just take one, I s'pose—and wall it up in the foundation. Specially for a bridge. It keeps anybody wicked from crossing over, see?"

Grey resumed his unbuttoning, more slowly. The hair prickled uneasily on his nape.

"The child—the murdered child—would cry out, I suppose?"

Tom looked surprised at his acumen.

"Yes, me lord. However did you know that?"

"Never mind. So St. Orgevald put a stop to this practice, did he? Good for him." He glanced, more kindly, at the small gold box. "There's a chapel, you say—is it in use?"

"No, me lord. It's full of bits of stored rubbish. Or, rather—'tisn't in use for what you might call devotions. Folk do go there." The boy flushed a bit, and frowned intently at his work. Grey deduced that Ilse might have shown him another use for a deserted chapel, but chose not to pursue the matter.

"I see. Was Ilse able to tell you anything else of interest?"

"Depends upon what you call interesting, me lord." Tom's eyes were still fixed upon his needle, but Grey could tell from the way in which he caught his upper lip between his teeth that he was in possession of a juicy bit of information.

"At this point, my chief interest is in my bed," Grey said, finally extricating himself from the waistcoat, "but tell me anyway."

"Reckon you know the nursemaid's still gone?" "I do."

"Did you know her name was Koenig, and that she was wife to the Hun soldier what the succubus got?"

Grey had just about broken Tom of calling the Germans "Huns," at least in their hearing, but chose to overlook this lapse.

"I did not." Grey unfastened his neckcloth, slowly. "Was this known to all the servants?" More importantly, did Stephan know?

"Oh, yes, me lord." Tom had laid down his needle, and now looked up, eager with his news. "See, the soldier, he used to do work here, at the Schloss."

"When? Was he a local man, then?" It was quite usual for soldiers to augment their pay by doing work for the local citizenry in their off hours, but Stephan's men had been *in situ* for less than a month. But if the nurserymaid was the man's wife—

"Yes, me lord. Born here, the both of them. He joined the local regiment some years a-gone, and came here to work—"

"What work did he do?" Grey asked, unsure whether this had any bearing on Koenig's demise, but wanting a moment to encompass the information.

"Builder," Tom replied promptly. "Part of the upper floors got the woodworm, and had to be replaced."

"Hmm. You seem remarkably well informed. Just how long did you spend in the chapel with young Ilse?"

Tom gave him a look of limpid innocence, much more inculpatory than an open leer.

"Me lord?"

"Never mind. Go on. Was the man working here at the time he was killed?"

"No, me lord. He left with the regiment two years back. He did come round a week or so ago, Ilse said, only to visit his friends among the servants, but he didn't work here."

Grey had now got down to his drawers, which he removed with a sigh of relief.

"Christ, what sort of perverse country is it where they put starch in a man's smallclothes? Can you not deal with the laundresses, Tom?"

"Sorry, me lord." Tom scrambled to retrieve the discarded drawers. "I didn't know the word for starch. I thought I did, but whatever I said just made 'em laugh."

"Well, don't make Ilse laugh too much. Leaving the maid-servants with child is an abuse of hospitality."

"Oh, no, me lord," Tom assured him earnestly. "We was too busy talking to, er ..."

"To be sure you were," Grey said equably. "Did she tell you anything else of interest?"

"Mebbe." Tom had the nightshirt already aired and hanging by the fire to warm; he held it up for Grey to draw over his head, the wool flannel soft and grateful as it slid over his skin. "Mind, it's only gossip."

"Mmm?"

"One of the older footmen, who used to work with Koenig—after Koenig came to visit, he was talkin' with one of the other servants, and he said in Ilse's hearing as how little Siegfried was growing up to be the spit of him. Of Koenig, I mean, not the footman. But then he saw her listening and shut up smart."

Grey stopped in the act of reaching for his banyan, and stared.

"Indeed," he said. Tom nodded, looking modestly pleased with the

effect of his findings.

"That's the princess's old husband, isn't it, over the mantelpiece in the drawing room? Ilse showed me the picture. Looks a proper old bugger, don't he?"

"Yes," said Grey, smiling slightly. "And?"

"He ain't had—hadn't, I mean—any children more than Siegfried, though he was married twice before. And Master Siegfried was born six months to the day after the old fellow died. That kind of thing always causes talk, don't it?"

"I should say so, yes." Grey thrust his feet into the proffered slippers. "Thank you, Tom. You've done more than well."

Tom shrugged modestly, though his round face beamed as if illuminated from within.

"Will I fetch you tea, me lord? Or a nice syllabub?"

"Thank you, no. Find your bed, Tom, you've earned your rest."

"Very good, me lord." Tom bowed; his manners were improving markedly, under the example of the Schloss's servants. He picked up the clothes Grey had left on the chair, to take away for brushing, but then stopped to examine the little reliquary, which Grey had left on the table.

"That's a handsome thing, me lord. A relic, did you say? Isn't that a bit of somebody?"

"It is." Grey started to tell Tom to take the thing away with him, but stopped. It was undoubtedly valuable; best to leave it here. "Probably a finger or a toe, judging from the size."

Tom bent, peering at the faded lettering.

"What does it say, me lord? Can you read it?"

"Probably." Grey took the box, and brought it close to the candle. Held thus at an angle, the worn lettering sprang into legibility. So did the drawing etched into the top, which Grey had to that point assumed to be merely decorative lines. The words confirmed it.

"Isn't that a ...?" Tom said, goggling at it.

"Yes, it is." Grey gingerly set the box down.

They regarded it in silence for a moment.

"Ah ... where did you get it, me lord?" Tom asked finally.

"The princess gave it me. As protection from the succubus."

"Oh." The young valet shifted his weight to one foot, and glanced sidelong at him. "Ah ... d'ye think it will work?"

Grey cleared his throat.

"I assure you, Tom, if the phallus of St. Orgevald does not protect



Left alone, he sank into the chair by the fire, closed his eyes, and tried to compose himself sufficiently to think. The conversation with Tom had at least allowed him a little distance, from which to contemplate matters with the princess and Stephan—save that they didn't bear contemplation.

He felt mildly nauseated, and sat up to pour a glass of plum brandy from the decanter on the table. That helped, settling both his stomach and his mind.

He sat slowly sipping it, gradually bringing his mental faculties to bear on the less personal aspects of the situation.

Tom's discoveries cast a new and most interesting light on matters. If Grey had ever believed in the existence of a succubus—and he was sufficiently honest to admit that there had been moments, both in the graveyard and in the dark-flickering halls of the Schloss—he believed no longer.

The attempted kidnapping was plainly the work of some human agency, and the revelation of the relationship between the two Koenigs—the vanished nursemaid and her dead husband—just as plainly indicated that the death of Private Koenig was part of the same affair, no matter what hocus-pocus had been contrived around it.

Grey's father had died when he was twelve, but had succeeded in instilling in his son his own admiration for the philosophy of reason. In addition to the concept of Occam's razor, his father had also introduced him to the useful doctrine of *cui bono*.

The plainly obvious answer there was the princess Louisa. Granting for the present that the gossip was true, and that Koenig had fathered little Siegfried ... the last thing the woman could want was for Koenig to return and hang about where awkward resemblances could be noted.

He had no idea of the German law regarding paternity. In England, a child born in wedlock was legally the offspring of the husband, even when everyone and the dog's mother knew that the wife had been openly unfaithful. By such means, several gentlemen of his

acquaintance had children, even though he was quite sure that the men had never even thought of sharing their wives' beds. Had Stephan perhaps—

He caught that thought by the scruff of the neck and shoved it aside. Besides, if the miniaturist had been faithful, Stephan's son was the spitting image of his father. Though painters naturally would produce what image they thought most desired by the patron, in spite of the reality—

He picked up the glass and drank from it until he felt breathless and his ears buzzed.

"Koenig," he said firmly, aloud. Whether the gossip was true or not—and having kissed the princess, he rather thought it was; no shrinking violet, she!—and whether or not Koenig's reappearance might threaten Siggy's legitimacy, the man's presence must certainly have been unwelcome.

Unwelcome enough to have arranged his death?

Why, when he would be gone again soon? The troops were likely to move within the week—surely within the month. Had something happened that made the removal of Private Koenig urgent? Perhaps Koenig himself had been in ignorance of Siegfried's parentage—and upon discovering the boy's resemblance to himself on his visit to the castle, determined to extort money or favor from the princess?

And bringing the matter full circle ... had the entire notion of the succubus been introduced merely to disguise Koenig's death? If so, how? The rumor had seized the imagination of both troops and townspeople to a marked extent—and Koenig's death had caused it to reach the proportions of a panic—but how had that rumor been started?

He dismissed that question for the moment, as there was no rational way of dealing with it. As for the death, though ...

He could without much difficulty envision the princess Louisa conspiring in the death of Koenig; he had noticed before that women were quite without mercy where their offspring were concerned. Still ... the princess had presumably not entered a soldier's quarters and done a man to death with her own lily-white hands.

Who had done it? Someone with great ties of loyalty to the princess, presumably. Though, upon second thought, it need not have been anyone from the castle. Gundwitz was not the teeming boil that London was, but the town was still of sufficient size to sustain a reasonable number of criminals; one of these could likely have been

induced to perform the actual murder—if it was a murder, he reminded himself. He must not lose sight of the null hypothesis, in his eagerness to reach a conclusion.

And further ... even if the princess had in some way contrived both the rumor of the succubus *and* the death of Private Koenig—who was the witch in Siggy's room? Had someone truly tried to abduct the child? Private Koenig was already dead; clearly he could have had nothing to do with it.

He ran a hand through his hair, rubbing his scalp slowly to assist thought.

Loyalties. Who was most loyal to the princess? Her butler? Stephan? He grimaced, but examined the thought carefully. No. There were no circumstances conceivable under which Stephan would have conspired in the murder of one of his own men. Grey might be in doubt of many things concerning the Hanoverian, but not his honor.

This led back to the princess's behavior toward himself. Did she act from attraction? Grey was modest about his own endowments, but also honest enough to admit that he possessed some and that his person was reasonably attractive to women.

He thought it more likely, if the princess had indeed conspired in Koenig's removal, that her actions toward himself were intended as distraction. Though there *was* yet another explanation. One of the minor corollaries to Occam's razor that he had himself derived suggested that quite often, the observed result of an action really was the intended end of that action. The end result of that encounter in the hallway was that Stephan von Namtzen had discovered him in embrace with the princess, and been noticeably annoyed by said discovery.

Had Louisa's motive been the very simple one of making von Namtzen jealous?

And if Stephan was jealous ... of whom? And what, if anything, did Bodger's death have to do with any of this?

The room had grown intolerably stuffy, and he rose, restless, and went to the window, unlatching the shutters. The moon was full, a great, fecund yellow orb that hung low above the darkened fields and cast its light over the slated roofs of Gundwitz and the paler sea of canvas tents that lay beyond.

Did Ruysdale's troops sleep soundly tonight, exhausted from their healthful exercise? He felt as though he would profit from such exercise himself. He braced himself in the window frame and pushed, feeling the muscles pop in his arms, envisioning escape into that freshening night, running naked and silent as a wolf, soft earth cool, yielding to his feet.

Cold air rushed past his body, raising the coarse hairs on his skin, but his core felt molten. Between the heat of fire and brandy, the nightshirt's original grateful warmth had become oppressive; sweat bloomed upon his body, and the woolen cloth hung limp upon him.

Suddenly impatient, he stripped it off, and stood in the open window, fierce and restless, the cold air caressing his nakedness.

There was a whir and rustle in the ivy nearby, and then something—several somethings—passed in absolute silence so close and so swiftly by his face that he had not even time to start backward, though his heart leapt to his throat, strangling his involuntary cry.

Bats. The creatures had disappeared in an instant, long before his startled mind had collected itself sufficiently to put a name to them.

He leaned out, searching, but the bats had disappeared at once into the dark, swift about their hunting. It was no wonder that legends of succubi abounded, in a place so bat-haunted. The behavior of the creatures indeed seemed supernatural.

The bounds of the small chamber seemed at once intolerably confining. He could imagine himself some demon of the air, taking wing to haunt the dreams of a man, seize upon a sleeping body and ride it—could he fly as far as England? he wondered. Was the night long enough?

The trees at the edge of the garden tossed uneasily, stirred by the wind. The night itself seemed tormented by an autumn restlessness, the sense of things moving, changing, fermenting.

His blood was still hot, having now reached a sort of full, rolling boil, but there was no outlet for it. He did not know whether Stephan's anger was on his own behalf—or Louisa's. In neither case, though, could he make any open demonstration of feeling toward von Namtzen now; it was too dangerous. He was unsure of the German attitude toward sodomites, but felt it unlikely to be more forgiving than the English stance. Whether stolid Protestant morality or a wilder Catholic mysticism—he cast a brief look at the reliquary—neither was likely to have sympathy with his own predilections.

The mere contemplation of revelation and the loss of its possibility, though, had shown him something important.

Stephan von Namtzen both attracted and aroused him, but it was not because of his own undoubted physical qualities. It was, rather, the degree to which those qualities reminded Grey of James Fraser.

Von Namtzen was nearly the same height as Fraser, a powerful man with broad shoulders, long legs, and an instantly commanding presence. However, Stephan was heavier, more crudely constructed, and less graceful than the Scot. And while Stephan warmed Grey's blood, the fact remained that the Hanoverian did not burn his heart like living flame.

He lay down finally upon his bed, and put out the candle. Lay watching the play of firelight on the walls, seeing not the flicker of wood flame, but the play of sun upon red hair, the sheen of sweat on a pale bronzed body ...

A brief and brutal dose of Mr. Keegan's remedy left him drained, if not yet peaceful. He lay staring upward into the shadows of the carved wooden ceiling, able at least to think once more.

The only conclusion of which he was sure was that he needed very much to talk to someone who had seen Koenig's body.

Chapter 6



Hocus-Pocus

Finding Private Koenig's last place of residence was simple. Thoroughly accustomed to having soldiers quartered upon them, Prussians sensibly built their houses with a separate chamber intended for the purpose. Indeed, the populace viewed such quartering not as an imposition, but as a windfall, since the soldiers not only paid for board and lodging and would often do chores such as fetching wood and water—but were also better protection against thieves than a large watchdog might be, without the expense.

Stephan's records were of course impeccable; he could lay hands on any one of his men at a moment's notice. And while he received Grey with extreme coldness, he granted the request without question, directing Grey to a house toward the western side of the town.

In fact, von Namtzen hesitated for a moment, clearly wondering whether duty obliged him to accompany Grey upon his errand, but Lance-Korporal Helwig appeared with a new difficulty—he averaged three per day—and Grey was left to carry out the errand on his own.

The house where Koenig had lodged was nothing out of the ordinary, so far as Grey could see. The owner of the house was rather remarkable, though, being a dwarf.

"Oh, the poor man! So much blood I have before not seen!"

Herr Hückel stood perhaps as high as Grey's waist—a novel sensation, to look down so far to an adult conversant. Herr Hückel was nonetheless intelligent and coherent, which was also novel in Grey's experience; most witnesses to violence tended to lose what wits they had and either to forget all details or to imagine impossible ones.

Herr Hückel, though, showed him willingly to the chamber where the death had occurred, and explained what he had himself seen.

"It was late, you see, sir, and my wife and I had gone to our bed. The soldiers were out—or at least we supposed so." The soldiers had just received their pay, and most were busy losing it in taverns or brothels. The Hückels had heard no noises from the soldiers' room,

and thus assumed that all four of the soldiers quartered with them were absent on such business.

Somewhere in the small hours, though, the good folk had been awakened by terrible yells coming from the chamber. These were not produced by Private Koenig, but by one of his companions, who had returned in a state of advanced intoxication, and stumbled into a blood-soaked shambles.

"He lay here, sir. Just so?" Herr Hückel waved his hands to indicate the position the body had occupied at the far side of the cozy room. There was nothing there now, save irregular dark blotches that stained the wooden floor.

"Not even lye would get it out," said Frau Hückel, who had come to the door of the room to watch. "And we had to burn the bedding."

Rather to Grey's surprise, she was not only of normal size, but quite pretty, with bright, soft hair peeking out from under her cap. She frowned at him in accusation.

"None of the soldiers will stay here now. They think the *Nachtmahr* will get them, too!" Clearly, this was Grey's fault. He bowed apologetically.

"I regret that, madam," he said. "Tell me, did you see the body?"

"No," she said promptly, "but I saw the night hag."

"Indeed," Grey said, surprised. "Er ... what did it—she—it look like?" He hoped he was not going to receive some form of Siggy's logical but unhelpful description, *Like a witch*.

"Now, Margarethe," said Herr Hückel, putting a warning hand up to his wife's arm. "It might not have been—"

"Yes, it was!" She transferred the frown to her husband, but did not shake off his hand, instead putting her own over it, before returning her attention to Grey.

"It was an old woman, sir, with her white hair in braids. Her shawl slipped off in the wind, and I saw. There are two old women who live nearby, this is true—but one walks only with a stick, and the other does not walk at all. This ... thing, she moved very quickly, hunched a little, but light on her feet."

Herr Hückel was looking more and more uneasy as this description progressed, and opened his mouth to interrupt, but was not given the chance.

"I am sure it was old Agathe!" Frau Hückel said, her voice dropping to a portentous whisper. Herr Hückel shut his eyes with a grimace.

"Old Agathe?" Grey asked, incredulous. "Do you mean Frau

Blomberg—the bürgermeister's mother?"

Frau Hückel nodded, face fixed in grave certainty.

"Something must be done," she declared. "Everyone is afraid at night—either to go out, or to stay in. Men whose wives will not watch over them as they sleep are falling asleep as they work, as they eat ..."

Grey thought briefly of mentioning Mr. Keegan's patent preventative, but dismissed the notion, instead turning to Herr Hückel to inquire for a close description of the state of the body.

"I am told that the throat was pierced, as with an animal's teeth," he said, at which Herr Hückel made a quick sign against evil and nodded, going a little pale. "Was the throat torn quite open—as though the man were attacked by a wolf? Or—" But Herr Hückel was already shaking his head.

"No, no! Only two marks—two holes. Like a snake's fangs." He poked two fingers into his own neck in illustration. "But so much blood!" He shuddered, glancing away from the marks on the floor-boards.

Grey had once seen a man bitten by a snake, when he was quite young—but there had been no blood that he recalled. Of course, the man had been bitten in the leg, too.

"Large holes, then?" Grey persisted, not liking to press the man to recall vividly unpleasant details, but determined to obtain as much information as possible.

With some effort, he established that the tooth marks had been sizable—perhaps a bit more than a quarter inch or so in diameter—and located on the front of Koenig's throat, about halfway up. He made Hückel show him, repeatedly, after ascertaining that the body had shown no other wound when undressed for cleansing and burial.

He glanced at the walls of the room, which had been freshly whitewashed. Nonetheless, there was a large dark blotch showing faintly, down near the floor—probably where Koenig had rolled against the wall in his death throes.

He had hoped that a description of Koenig's body would enable him to discover some connection between the two deaths—but the only similarity between the deaths of Koenig and Bodger appeared to be that both men were indeed dead, and both dead under impossible circumstances.

He thanked the Hückels and prepared to take his leave, only then realizing that Frau Hückel had resumed her train of thought and was speaking to him quite earnestly. "... call a witch to cast the runes," she said.

"I beg your pardon, madam?"

She drew in a breath of deep exasperation, but refrained from open rebuke.

"Herr Blomberg," she repeated, giving Grey a hard look. "He will call a witch to cast the runes. Then we will discover the truth of everything!"



"He will do what?" Sir Peter squinted at Grey in disbelief. "Witches?"

"Only one, I believe, sir," Grey assured Sir Peter. According to Frau Hückel, matters had been escalating in Gundwitz. The rumor that Herr Blomberg's mother was custodian to the succubus was rampant in the town, and public opinion was in danger of overwhelming the little bürgermeister.

Herr Blomberg, however, was a stubborn man, and most devoted to his mother's memory. He refused entirely to allow her coffin to be dug up and her body desecrated.

The only solution, which Herr Blomberg had declared out of desperation, seemed to be to discover the true identity and hiding place of the succubus. To this end, the bürgermeister had summoned a witch, who would cast runes—

"What are those?" Sir Peter asked, puzzled.

"I am not entirely sure, sir," Grey admitted. "Some object for divination, I suppose."

"Really?" Sir Peter rubbed his knuckles dubiously beneath a long, thin nose. "Sounds very fishy, what? This witch could say anything, couldn't she?"

"I suppose Herr Blomberg expects that if he is paying for the ... er ... ceremony, the lady is perhaps more likely to say something favorable to his situation," Grey suggested.

"Hmm. Still don't like it," Sir Peter said. "Don't like it at all. Could be trouble, Grey, surely you see that?"

"I do not believe you can stop him, sir."

"Perhaps not, perhaps not." Sir Peter ruminated fiercely, brow crinkled under his wig. "Ah! Well, how's this, then—you go round and fix it up, Grey. Tell Herr Blomberg he can have his mumbo jumbo, but

he must do it here, at the Schloss. That way we can keep a lid on it, what, see there's no untoward excitement?"

"Yes, sir," Grey said, manfully suppressing a sigh, and went off to execute his orders.



By the time he reached his room to change for dinner, Grey felt dirty, irritable, and thoroughly out of sorts. It had taken most of the afternoon to track down Herr Blomberg and convince him to hold his —Christ, what was it? His rune-casting?—at the Schloss. Then he had run across the pest Helwig, and before he was able to escape, had been embroiled in an enormous controversy with a gang of mule drovers who claimed not to have been paid by the army.

This in turn had entailed a visit to two army camps, an inspection of thirty-four mules, trying interviews with both Sir Peter's paymaster and von Namtzen's—and involved a further cold interview with Stephan, who had behaved as though Grey were personally responsible for the entire affair, then turned his back, dismissing Grey in mid-sentence, as though unable to bear the sight of him.

He flung off his coat, sent Tom to fetch hot water, and irritably tugged off his stock, wishing he could hit someone.

A knock sounded on the door, and he froze, irritation vanishing upon the moment. What to do? Pretend he wasn't in was the obvious course, in case it was Louisa in her sheer lawn shift or something worse. But if it were Stephan, come either to apologize or to demand further explanation?

The knock sounded again. It was a good, solid knock. Not what one would expect of a female—particularly not of a female intent on dalliance. Surely the princess would be more inclined to a discreet scratching?

The knock came again, peremptory, demanding. Taking an enormous breath and trying to still the thumping of his heart, Grey jerked the door open.

"I wish to speak to you," said the dowager, and sailed into the room, not waiting for invitation.

"Oh," said Grey, having lost all grasp of German on the spot. He closed the door, and turned to the old lady, instinctively tightening

the sash of his banyan.

She ignored his mute gesture toward the chair, but stood in front of the fire, fixing him with a steely gaze. She was completely dressed, he saw, with a faint sense of relief. He really could not have borne the sight of the dowager *en dishabille*.

"I have come to ask you," she said without preamble, "if you have intentions to marry Louisa."

"I have not," he said, his German returning with miraculous promptitude. "Nein."

One sketchy gray brow twitched upward.

"Ja? That is not what she thinks."

He rubbed a hand over his face, groping for some diplomatic reply—and found it, in the feel of the stubble on his own jaw.

"I admire Princess Louisa greatly," he said. "There are few women who are her equal"—And thank God for that, he added to himself—"but I regret that I am not free to undertake any obligation. I have ... an understanding. In England." His understanding with James Fraser was that if he were ever to lay a hand on the man or speak his heart, Fraser would break his neck instantly. It was, however, certainly an understanding, and clear as Waterford crystal.

The dowager looked at him with a narrow gaze of such penetrance that he wanted to tighten his sash further—and take several steps backward. He stood his ground, though, returning the look with one of patent sincerity.

"Hmph!" she said at last. "Well, then. That is good." Without another word, she turned on her heel. Before she could close the door behind her, he reached out and grasped her arm.

She swung round to him, surprised and outraged at his presumption. He ignored this, though, absorbed in what he had seen as she lifted her hand to the doorframe.

"Pardon, Your Highness," he said. He touched the medal pinned to the bodice of her gown. He had seen it a hundred times, and assumed it always to contain the image of some saint—which, he supposed, it did, but certainly not in the traditional manner.

"St. Orgevald?" he inquired. The image was crudely embossed, and could easily be taken for something else—if one hadn't seen the larger version on the lid of the reliquary.

"Certainly." The old lady fixed him with a glittering eye, shook her head, and went out, closing the door firmly behind her.

For the first time, it occurred to Grey that whoever Orgevald had

been, it was entirely possible that he had not originally been a saint. Some rather earthier ancient Germanic deity, perhaps? Pondering this interesting notion, he went to bed.

Chapter 7



Ambush

The next day dawned cold and windy. Grey saw pheasants huddling under the cover of shrubs as he rode, crows hugging the ground in the stubbled fields, and slate roofs thick with shuffling doves, feathered bodies packed together in the quest for heat. In spite of their reputed brainlessness, he had to think that the birds were more sensible than he.

Birds had no duty—but it wasn't quite duty that propelled him on this ragged, chilly morning. It was in part simple curiosity, in part official suspicion. He wished to find the gypsies; in particular, he wished to find *one* gypsy: the woman who had quarreled with Private Bodger soon before his death.

If he were quite honest—and he felt that he could afford to be, so long as it was within the privacy of his own mind—he had another motive for the journey. It would be entirely natural for him to pause at the bridge for a cordial word with the artillerymen, and perhaps see for himself how the boy with the red lips was faring.

While all these motives were undoubtedly sound, though, the real reason for his expedition was simply that it would remove him from the Schloss. He did not feel safe in a house containing the princess Louisa, let alone her mother-in-law. Neither could he go to his usual office in the town, for fear of encountering Stephan.

The whole situation struck him as farcical in the extreme; still, he could not keep himself from thinking about it—about Stephan.

Had he been deluding himself about Stephan's attraction to him? He was as vain as any man, he supposed, but he could swear ... His thoughts went round and round in the same weary circle. And yet, each time he thought to dismiss them entirely, he felt again the overwhelming sense of warmth and casual possession with which Stephan had kissed him. He had not imagined it. And yet ...

Embrangled in this tedious but inescapable coil, he reached the bridge by mid-morning, only to find that the young soldier was not in camp.

"Franz? Gone foraging, maybe," said the Hanoverian corporal, with a shrug. "Or got homesick and run. They do that, the young ones."

"Got scared," one of the other men suggested, overhearing.

"Scared of what?" Grey asked sharply, wondering whether in spite of everything, word of the succubus had reached the bridge.

"Scared of his shadow, that one," said the man he recalled as Samson, making a face. "He keeps talking about the child; he hears a crying child at night."

"Thought you heard it, too, eh?" said the Hanoverian, not sounding entirely friendly. "The night it rained so hard?"

"Me? I didn't hear anything then but Franz's squealing." There was a rumble of laughter at that, the sound of which made Grey's heart drop to his boots. *Too late,* he thought. "At the lightning," Samson added blandly, catching his glance.

"He's run for home," the Hanoverian declared. "Let him go; no use here for a coward."

There was a small sense of disquiet in the man's manner that belied his confidence, Grey thought—and yet there was nothing to be done about it. He had no direct authority over these men, could not order a search to be undertaken.

As he crossed the bridge, though, he could not help but glance over. The water had subsided only a little; the flood still tumbled past, choked with torn leaves and half-seen sodden objects. He did not want to stop, to be caught looking, and yet looked as carefully as he could, half-expecting to see little Franz's delicate body broken on the rocks, or the blind eyes of a drowned face trapped beneath the water.

He saw nothing but the usual flood debris, though, and with a slight sense of relief, continued on toward the hills.

He knew nothing save the direction the gypsy wagons had been going when last observed. It was long odds that he would find them, but he searched doggedly, pausing at intervals to scan the countryside with his spyglass, or to look for rising plumes of smoke.

These last occurred sporadically, but proved invariably to be peasant huts or charcoal-burners, all of whom either disappeared promptly when they saw his red coat or stared and crossed themselves, but none of whom admitted to having heard of the gypsies, let alone seen them.

The sun was coming down the sky, and he realized that he must turn back soon or be caught in open country by night. He had a tinderbox and a bottle of ale in his saddlebag, but no food, and the prospect of being marooned in this fashion was unwelcome, particularly with the French forces only a few miles to the west. If the British army had scouts, so did the frogs, and he was lightly armed, with no more than a pair of pistols, a rather dented cavalry saber, and his dagger to hand.

Not wishing to risk Karolus on the boggy ground, he was riding another of his horses, a thickset bay who went by the rather unflattering name of Hognose, but who had excellent manners and a steady foot. Steady enough that Grey could ignore the ground, trying to focus his attention, strained from prolonged tension, into a last look round. The foliage of the hills around him faded into patchwork, shifting constantly in the roiling wind. Again and again, he thought he saw things—human figures, animals moving, the briefly seen corner of a wagon—only to have them prove illusory when he ventured toward them.

The wind whined incessantly in his ears, adding spectral voices to the illusions that plagued him. He rubbed a hand over his face, gone numb from the cold, imagining momentarily that he heard the wails of Franz's ghostly child. He shook his head to dispel the impression but it persisted.

He drew Hognose to a stop, turning his head from side to side, listening intently. He was sure he heard it—but what was it? No words were distinguishable above the moaning of the wind, but there was a sound, he was sure of it.

At the same time, it seemed to come from nowhere in particular; try as he might, he could not locate it. The horse heard it, too, though—he saw the bay's ears prick and turn nervously.

"Where?" he said softly, laying the rein on the horse's neck. "Where is it? Can you find it?"

The horse apparently had little interest in finding the noise, but some in getting away from it; Hognose backed, shuffling on the sandy ground, kicking up sheaves of wet yellow leaves. Grey drew him up sharply, swung down, and wrapped the reins around a bare-branched sapling.

With the horse's revulsion as guide, he saw what he had overlooked: the churned earth of a badger's sett, half hidden by the sprawling roots of a large elm. Once focused on this, he could pinpoint the noise as coming from it. And damned if he'd ever heard a badger carry on like that!

Pistol drawn and primed, he edged toward the bank of earth, keeping a wary eye on the nearby trees.

It was certainly crying, but not a child; a sort of muffled whimpering, interspersed with the kind of catch in the breath that injured men often made.

"Wer ist da?" he demanded, halting just short of the opening to the sett, pistol raised. "You are injured?"

There was a gulp of surprise, followed at once by scrabbling sounds.

"Major? Major Grey? It is you?"

"Franz?" he said, flabbergasted.

"Ja, Major! Help me, help me, please!"

Uncocking the pistol and thrusting it back in his belt, he knelt and peered into the hole. Badger setts are normally deep, running straight down for six feet or more before turning, twisting sideways into the badger's den. This one was no exception; the grimy, tear-streaked face of the young Prussian soldier stared up at him from the bottom, his head a good foot below the rim of the hole.

The boy had broken his leg in falling, and it was no easy matter to lift him straight up. Grey managed it at last by improvising a sling of his own shirt and the boy's, tied to a rope anchored to Hognose's saddle.

At last he had the boy laid on the ground, covered with his coat and taking small sips from the bottle of ale.

"Major—" Franz coughed and spluttered, trying to rise on one elbow.

"Hush, don't try to talk." Grey patted his arm soothingly, wondering how best to get him back to the bridge. "Everything will be—"

"But Major—the red coats! Der Inglischeren!"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Dead Englishmen! It was the little boy; I heard him, and I dug, and —" The boy's story was spilling out in a torrent of Prussian, and it took no little time for Grey to slow him down sufficiently to disentangle the threads of what he was saying.

He had, Grey understood him to say, repeatedly heard the crying near the bridge, but his fellows either didn't hear or wouldn't admit to it, instead teasing him mercilessly about it. At last he determined to go by himself and see if he could find a source for the sound—wind moaning through a hole, as his friend Jurgen had suggested.

"But it wasn't." Franz was still pale, but small patches of hectic color glowed in the translucent skin of his cheeks. He had poked about the base of the bridge, discovering eventually a small crack in the rocks at the foot of a pillar on the far side of the river. Thinking that this might indeed be the source of the crying, he had inserted his bayonet and pried at the rock—which had promptly come away, leaving him face to face with a cavity inside the pillar, containing a small, round, very white skull.

"More bones, too, I think. I didn't stop to look." The boy swallowed. He had simply run, too panicked to think. When he stopped at last, completely out of breath and with legs like jelly, he had sat down to rest and think what to do.

"They couldn't beat me more than once for being gone," he said, with the ghost of a smile. "So I thought I would be gone a little longer."

This decision was enhanced by the discovery of a grove of walnut trees, and Franz had made his way up into the hills, gathering both nuts and wild blackberries—his lips were still stained purple with the juice, Grey saw.

He had been interrupted in this peaceful pursuit by the sound of gunfire. Throwing himself flat on the ground, he had then crept forward, until he could see over the edge of a little rocky escarpment. Below, in a hollow, he saw a small group of English soldiers, engaged in mortal combat with Austrians.

"Austrians? You are sure?" Grey asked, astonished.

"I know what Austrians look like," the boy assured him, a little tartly. Knowing what Austrians were capable of, too, he had promptly backed up, risen to his feet, and run as fast as he could in the opposite direction—only to fall into the badger's sett.

"You were lucky the badger wasn't at home," Grey remarked, teeth beginning to chatter. He had reclaimed the remnants of his shirt, but this was insufficient shelter against dropping temperature and probing wind. "But you said dead Englishmen."

"I think they were all dead," the boy said. "I didn't go see."

Grey, however, must. Leaving the boy covered with his coat and a mound of dead leaves, he untied the horse and turned his head in the direction Franz had indicated.

Proceeding with care and caution in case of lurking Austrians, it was nearly sunset before he found the hollow.

It was Dundas and his survey party; he recognized the uniforms at once. Cursing under his breath, he flung himself off his horse and scrabbled hurriedly from one body to the next, hoping against hope as

he pressed shaking fingers against cooling cheeks and flaccid breasts.

Two were still alive: Dundas and a corporal. The corporal was badly wounded and unconscious; Dundas had taken a gun butt to the head and a bayonet through the chest, but the wound had fortunately sealed itself. The lieutenant was disabled and in pain, but not yet on the verge of death.

"Hundreds of the buggers," he croaked breathlessly, gripping Grey's arm. "Saw ... whole battalion ... guns. Going to ... the French. Lloyd—followed them. Spying. Heard. Fucking succ—succ—" He coughed hard, spraying a little blood with the saliva, but it seemed to ease his breath temporarily.

"It was a plan. Got women—agents. Slept with men, gave them oopium. Dreams. Panic, aye?" He was half sitting up, straining to make words, make Grey understand.

Grey understood, only too well. He had been given opium once, by a doctor, and remembered vividly the weirdly erotic dreams that had ensued. Do the same to men who had likely never heard of opium, let alone experienced it, and at the same time, start rumors of a demoness who preyed upon men in their dreams? Particularly with a flesh-and-blood avatar, who could leave such marks as would convince a man he had been so victimized?

Only too effective, and one of the cleverest notions he had ever come across for demoralizing an enemy before attack. It was that alone that gave him some hope, as he comforted Dundas, piling him with coats taken from the dead, dragging the corporal to lie near the lieutenant for the sake of shared warmth, digging through a discarded rucksack for water to give him.

If the combined force of French and Austrians was huge, there would be no need for such subtleties—the enemy would simply roll over the English and their German allies. But if the numbers were closer to equal, and it was still necessary to funnel them across those two narrow bridges ... then, yes, it was desirable to face an enemy who had not slept for several nights, whose men were tired and jumpy, whose officers were not paying attention to possible threat, being too occupied with the difficulties close at hand.

He could see it clearly: Ruysdale was busy watching the French, who were sitting happily on the cliffs, moving just enough to keep attention diverted from the Austrian advance. The Austrians would come down on the bridge—likely at night—and then the French on their heels.

Dundas was shivering, eyes closed, teeth set hard in his lower lip against the pain of the movement.

"Christopher, can you hear me? Christopher!" Grey shook him, as gently as possible. "Where's Lloyd?" He didn't know the members of Dundas's party; if Lloyd had been taken captive, or—But Dundas was shaking his head, gesturing feebly toward one of the corpses, lying with his head smashed open.

"Go on," Dundas whispered. His face was gray, and not only from the waning light. "Warn Sir Peter." He put his arm about the unconscious corporal, and nodded to Grey. "We'll ... wait."

Chapter 8



The Witch

Grey had been staring with great absorption at his valet's face for some moments, before he realized even what he was looking at, let alone why.

"Uh?" he said.

"I *said*," Tom repeated, with some emphasis, "you best drink this, me lord, or you're going to fall flat on your face, and that won't do, will it?"

"It won't? Oh. No. Of course not." He took the cup, adding a belated "Thank you, Tom. What is it?"

"I told you twice, I'm not going to try and say the name of it again. Ilse says it'll keep you on your feet, though." He leaned forward and sniffed approvingly at the liquid, which appeared to be brown and foamy, indicating the presence in it of eggs, Grey thought.

He followed Tom's lead and sniffed, too, recoiling only slightly at the eye-watering reek. Hartshorn, perhaps? It had quite a lot of brandy, no matter what else was in it. And he did need to stay on his feet. With no more than a precautionary clenching of his belly muscles, he put back his head and drained it.

He had been awake for nearly forty-eight hours, and the world around him had a tendency to pass in and out of focus, like the scene in a spyglass. He had also a proclivity to go intermittently deaf, not hearing what was said to him—and Tom was correct, that wouldn't do.

He had taken time, the night before, to fetch Franz, put him on the horse—with a certain amount of squealing, it must be admitted, as Franz had never been on a horse before—and take him to the spot where Dundas lay, feeling that they would be better together. He had pressed his dagger into Franz's hands, and left him guarding the corporal and the lieutenant, who by then was passing in and out of consciousness.

Grey had then donned his coat and come back to raise the alarm,

riding a flagging horse at the gallop over pitch-black ground, by the light of a waning moon. He'd fallen twice, when Hognose stumbled, but luckily escaped injury either time.

He had alerted the artillery crew at the bridge, ridden on to Ruysdale's encampment, roused everyone, seen the colonel in spite of all attempts to prevent him waking the man, gathered a rescue party, and ridden back to retrieve Dundas and the others, arriving in the hollow near dawn to find the corporal dead and Dundas nearly so, with his head in Franz's lap.

Captain Hiltern had of course sent someone with word to Sir Peter at the Schloss, but it was necessary for Grey to report personally to Sir Peter and von Namtzen when he returned at midday with the rescue party. After which, officers and men had flapped out of the place like a swarm of bats, the whole military apparatus moving like the armature of some great engine, creaking, groaning, but coming to life with amazing speed.

Which left Grey alone in the Schloss at sunset, blank in mind and body, with nothing further to do. There was no need for liaison; couriers were flitting to and from all the regiments, carrying orders. He had no duty to perform, no one to command, no one to serve.

He would ride out in the morning with Sir Peter Hicks, part of Sir Peter's personal guard. But there was no need for him now; everyone was about his own business; Grey was forgotten.

He felt odd; not unwell, but as though objects and people near him were not quite real, not entirely firm to the touch. He should sleep, he knew—but could not, not with the whole world in flux around him, and a sense of urgency that hummed on his skin yet was unable to penetrate to the core of his mind.

Tom was talking to him; he made an effort to attend.

"Witch," he repeated, awareness struggling to make itself known. "Witch. You mean Herr Blomberg still intends to hold his—ceremony?"

"Yes, me lord." Tom was sponging Grey's coat, frowning as he tried to remove a pitch stain from the skirt. "Ilse says he won't rest until he's cleared his mother's name, and damned if the Austrians will stop him."

Awareness burst through Grey's fog like a pricked soap bubble.

"Christ! He doesn't know!"

"About what, me lord?" Tom turned to look at him curiously, sponging cloth and vinegar in hand.

"The succubus. I must tell him—explain." Even as he said it, though, he realized how little force such an explanation would have upon Herr Blomberg's real problem. Sir Peter and Colonel Ruysdale might accept the truth; the townspeople would be much less likely to accept having been fooled—and by Austrians!

Grey knew enough about gossip and rumor to realize that no amount of explanation from him would be enough. Still less if that explanation were to be filtered through Herr Blomberg, whose bias in the matter was clear.

Even Tom was frowning doubtfully at him as he rapidly explained the matter. Superstition and sensation are always so much more appealing than truth and rationality. The words echoed as though spoken in his ear, with the same humorously rueful intonation with which his father had spoken them, many years before.

He rubbed a hand vigorously over his face, feeling himself come back to life. Perhaps he had one more task to complete, in his role as liaison.

"This witch, Tom—the woman who is to cast the runes, whatever in God's name that might involve. Do you know where she is?"

"Oh, yes, me lord." Tom had put down his cloth now, interested. "She's here—in the Schloss, I mean. Locked up in the larder."

"Locked up in the larder? Why?"

"Well, it has a good lock on the door, me lord, to keep the servants from—Oh, you mean why's she locked up at all? Ilse says she didn't want to come; dug in her heels entire, and wouldn't hear of it. But Herr Blomberg wouldn't hear of her *not*, and had her dragged up here, and locked up 'til this evening. He's fetching up the town council, and the magistrate, and all the bigwigs he can lay hands on, Ilse says."

"Take me to her."

Tom's mouth dropped open. He closed it with a snap and looked Grey up and down.

"Not like that. You're not even shaved!"

"Precisely like this," Grey assured him, tucking in the tails of his shirt. "Now."



The game larder was locked, but as Grey had surmised, Ilse knew

where the key was kept, and was not proof against Tom's charm. The room itself was in an alcove behind the kitchens, and it was a simple matter to reach it without detection.

"You need not come further, Tom," Grey said, low-voiced. "Give me the keys; if anyone finds me here, I'll say I took them."

Tom, who had taken the precaution of arming himself with a toasting fork, merely clutched the keys tighter in his other hand, and shook his head.

The door swung open silently on leather hinges. Someone had given the captive woman a candle; it lit the small space and cast fantastic shadows on the walls, from the hanging bodies of swans and pheasants, ducks and geese.

The drink had restored a sense of energy to Grey's mind and body, but without quite removing the sense of unreality that had pervaded his consciousness. It was therefore with no real surprise that he saw the woman who turned toward him, and recognized the gypsy prostitute who had quarreled with Private Bodger a few hours before the soldier's death.

She obviously recognized him, too, though she said nothing. Her eyes passed over him with cool scorn, and she turned away, evidently engrossed in some silent communion with a severed hog's head that sat upon a china plate.

"Madam," he said softly, as though his voice might rouse the dead fowl to sudden flight. "I would speak with you."

She ignored him, and folded her hands elaborately behind her back. The light winked gold from the rings in her ears and the rings on her fingers—and Grey saw that one was a crude circlet, with the emblem of St. Orgevald's protection.

He was overcome with a sudden sense of premonition, though he did not believe in premonition. He felt things in motion around him, things that he did not understand and could not control, things settling of themselves into an ordained and appointed position, like the revolving spheres of his father's orrery—and he wished to protest this state of affairs, but could not.

"Me lord." Tom's hissed whisper shook him out of this momentary disorientation, and he glanced at the boy, eyebrows raised. Tom was staring at the woman, who was still turned away, but whose face was visible in profile.

"Hanna," he said, nodding at the gypsy. "She looks like Hanna, Siggy's nursemaid. You know, me lord, the one what disappeared?"

The woman had swung round abruptly at mention of Hanna's name, and stood glaring at them both.

Grey felt the muscles of his back loosen, very slightly, as though some force had picked him up and held him. As though he, too, was one of the objects being moved, placed in the spot ordained for him.

"I have a proposition for you, madam," he said calmly, and pulled a cask of salted fish out from beneath a shelf. He sat on it and, reaching out, pulled the door closed.

"I do not wish to hear anything you say, *Schweinehund*," she said, very coldly. "As for you, piglet ..." Her eyes darkened with no very pleasant light as she looked at Tom.

"You have failed," Grey went on, ignoring this digression. "And you are in considerable danger. The Austrian plan is known; you can hear the soldiers preparing for battle, can't you?" It was true; the sounds of drums and distant shouting, the shuffle of many marching feet, were audible even here, though muffled by the stone walls of the Schloss.

He smiled pleasantly at her, and his fingers touched the silver gorget that he had seized before leaving his room. It hung about his neck, over his half-buttoned shirt, the sign of an officer on duty.

"I offer you your life, and your freedom. In return ..." He paused. She said nothing, but one straight black brow rose, slowly.

"I want a bit of justice," he said. "I want to know how Private Bodger died. Bodger," he repeated, seeing her look of incomprehension, and realizing that she had likely never known his name. "The English soldier who said you had cheated him."

She sniffed contemptuously, but a crease of angry amusement lined the edge of her mouth.

"Him. God killed him. Or the devil, take your choice. Or, no—" The crease deepened, and she thrust out the hand with the ring on it, nearly in his face. "I think it was my saint. Do you believe in saints, pig-soldier?"

"No," he said calmly. "What happened?"

"He saw me, coming out of a tavern, and he followed me. I didn't know he was there; he caught me in an alley, but I pulled away and ran into the churchyard. I thought he wouldn't follow me there, but he did."

Bodger had been both angry and aroused, insisting that he would take the satisfaction she had earlier denied him. She had kicked and struggled, but he was stronger than she.

"And then—" She shrugged. "Poof. He stops what he is doing, and

makes a sound."

"What sort of sound?"

"How should I know? Men make all kinds of sounds. Farting, groaning, belching ... pff." She bunched her fingers and flicked them sharply, disposing of men and all their doings with the gesture.

At any rate, Bodger had then dropped heavily to his knees, and still clinging to her dress, had fallen over. The gypsy had rapidly pried loose his fingers and run, thanking the intercession of St. Orgevald.

"Hmm." A sudden weakness of the heart? An apoplexy? Keegan had said such a thing was possible—and there was no evidence to belie the gypsy's statement. "Not like Private Koenig, then," Grey said, watching carefully.

Her head jerked up and she stared hard at him, lips tight.

"Me lord," said Tom softly behind him. "Hanna's name is Koenig."

"It is not!" the gypsy snapped. "It is Mulengro, as is mine!"

"First things first, if you please, madam," Grey said, repressing the urge to stand up, as she leaned glowering over him. "Where *is* Hanna? And what is she to you? Sister, cousin, daughter ...?"

"Sister," she said, biting the word off like a thread. Her lips were tight as a seam, but Grey touched his gorget once again.

"Life," he said. "And freedom." He regarded her steadily, watching indecision play upon her features like the wavering shadows on the walls. She had no way of knowing how powerless he was; he could neither condemn nor release her—and nor would anyone else, all being caught up in the oncoming maelstrom of war.

In the end, he had his way, as he had known he would, and sat listening to her in a state that was neither trance nor dream; just a tranquil acceptance as the pieces fell before him, one upon one.

She was one of the women recruited by the Austrians to spread the rumors of the succubus—and had much enjoyed the spreading, judging from the way she licked her lower lip while telling of it. Her sister Hanna had been married to the soldier Koenig, but had rejected him, he being a faithless hound, like all men.

Bearing in mind the gossip regarding Siegfried's paternity, Grey nodded thoughtfully, motioning to her with one hand to go on.

She did. Koenig had gone away with the army, but then had come back, and had had the audacity to visit the Schloss, trying to rekindle the flame with Hanna. Afraid that he might succeed in seducing her sister again—"She is weak, Hanna," she said with a shrug, "she will trust men!"—she had gone to visit Koenig at night, planning to drug

him with wine laced with opium, as she had done with the others.

"Only this time, a fatal dose, I suppose." Grey had propped his elbow upon his crossed knee, hand under his chin. The tiredness had come back; it hovered near at hand, but was not yet clouding his mental processes.

"I meant it so, yes." She uttered a short laugh. "But he knew the taste of opium. He threw it at me, and grabbed me by the throat."

Whereupon she had drawn the dagger she always carried at her belt and stabbed at him—striking upward into his open mouth, and piercing his brain.

"You never saw so much blood in all your life," the gypsy assured Grey, unconsciously echoing Herr Hückel.

"Oh, I rather think I have," Grey said politely. His hand went to his own waist—but, of course, he had left his dagger with Franz. "But pray go on. The marks, as of an animal's fangs?"

"A nail," she said, and shrugged.

"So, was it him—Koenig, I mean—was it him tried to snatch little Siggy?" Tom, deeply absorbed in the revelations, could not keep himself from blurting out the question. He coughed and tried to fade back into the woodwork, but Grey indicated that this was a question which he himself found of some interest.

"It can't have been; Koenig was already dead. But I assume that it was you the boy saw in his chamber?" What did this witch look like? he had asked. Like a witch, the child replied. Did she? She did not look like Grey's conception of a witch—but what was that, save the fabrication of a limited imagination?

She was tall for a woman, dark, and her face mingled an odd sexuality with a strongly forbidding aspect—a combination that many men would find intriguing. Grey thought it was not something that would have struck Siggy, but something else about her evidently had.

She nodded. She was fingering her ring, he saw, and watching him with calculation, as though deciding whether to tell him a lie.

"I have seen the dowager princess's medal," he said politely. "Is she an Austrian, by birth? I assume that you and your sister are."

The woman stared at him, and said something in her own tongue, which sounded highly uncomplimentary.

"And you think *I* am a witch!" she said, evidently translating the thought.

"No, I don't," Grey said. "But others do, and that is what brings us here. If you please, madam, let us conclude our business. I expect

someone will shortly come for you." The Schloss was at dinner; Tom had brought Grey a tray, which he was too tired to eat. No doubt the rune-casting would be the after-dinner entertainment, and he must make his desires clear before that.

"Well, then." The gypsy regarded him, her awe at his perspicacity fading back into the usual derision. "It was your fault."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It was Princess Gertrude—the dowager. She saw Louisa—that slut"—she spat casually on the floor, almost without pausing, and went on—"making sheep's eyes at you, and was afraid she meant to marry you. Louisa thought she would marry you and go to England, to be safe and rich. But if she did, she would take with her her son."

"And the dowager did not wish to be parted from her grandson," Grey said slowly. Whether the gossip was true or not, the old woman loved the boy.

The gypsy nodded. "So she arranged that we would take the boymy sister and me. He would be safe with us, and after a time, when the Austrians had killed you all, we would bring him back."

Hanna had gone down the ladder first, meaning to comfort Siggy if he woke in the rain. But Siggy had wakened too soon, and bollixed the scheme by running out of the room. Hanna had no choice but to flee when Grey had tipped the ladder over, leaving her sister to hide in the Schloss and make her way out at daybreak, with the help of the dowager.

"She is with our family," the gypsy said, with another shrug. "Safe." "The ring," Grey said, nodding at the gypsy's circlet. "Do you serve the dowager? Is that what it means?"

So much confessed, the gypsy evidently felt now at ease. Casually, she pushed a platter of dead doves aside, and sat down upon the shelf, feet dangling.

"We are Rom," she said, drawing herself up proudly. "The Rom serve no one. But we have known the Trauchtenbergs—the dowager's family—for generations, and there is tradition between us. It was her great-grandfather who bought the child who guards the bridge—and that child was the younger brother of my own great-grandfather. The ring was given to my great-grandfather then, as a sign of the bargain."

Grey heard Tom grunt slightly with confusion, but took no heed. The words struck him as forcibly as a blow, and he could not speak for a moment. The thing was too shocking. He took a deep breath, fighting the vision of Franz's words—the small, round white skull,

looking out at him from the hollow in the bridge.

Sounds of banging and clashing dishes from the scullery nearby brought him to himself, though, and he realized that time was growing short.

"Very well," he said, as briskly as he could. "I want one last bit of justice, and our bargain is made. Agathe Blomberg."

"Old Agathe?" The gypsy laughed, and in spite of her missing tooth, he could see how attractive she could be. "How funny! How could they suppose such an old stick might be a demon of desire? A hag, yes, but a night hag?" She went off into peals of laughter, and Grey jumped to his feet, seizing her by the shoulder to silence her.

"Be quiet," he said. "Someone will come."

She stopped then, though she still snorted with amusement.

"So, then?"

"So, then," he said firmly. "When you do your hocus-pocus—whatever it is they've brought you here to do—I wish you particularly to exonerate Agathe Blomberg. I don't care what you say or how you do it—I leave that to your own devices, which I expect are considerable."

She looked at him for a moment, looked down at his hand upon her shoulder, and shrugged it off.

"That's all, is it?" she asked sarcastically.

"That's all. Then you may go."

"Oh, I may go? How kind." She stood smiling at him, but not in a kindly way. It occurred to him quite suddenly that she had required no assurances from him, had not asked for so much as his word as a gentleman—though he supposed she would not have valued that, in any case.

She did not care, he realized, with a small shock. She had not told him anything for the sake of saving herself—she simply wasn't afraid. Did she think the dowager would protect her, for the sake either of their ancient bond, or because of what she knew about the failed kidnapping?

Perhaps. Perhaps she had confidence in something else. And if she had, he chose not to consider what that might be. He rose from the cask of fish, and pushed it back under the shelves.

"Agathe Blomberg was a woman, too," he said.

She rose, too, and stood looking at him, rubbing her ring with apparent thought.

"So she was. Well, perhaps I will do it, then. Why should men dig

up her coffin and drag her poor old carcass through the streets?"

He could feel Tom behind him, vibrating with eagerness to be gone; the racket of the dinner-clearing was much louder.

"For you, though—"

He glanced at her, startled by the tone in her voice, which held something different. Neither mockery nor venom, nor any other emotion that he knew.

Her eyes were huge, gleaming in the candlelight, but so dark that they seemed void pools, her face without expression.

"You will never satisfy a woman," she said softly. "Any woman who shares your bed will leave after no more than a single night, cursing you."

Grey rubbed a knuckle against his stubbled chin, and nodded.

"Very likely, madam," he said. "Good night."

Epilogue



Among the Trumpets

The order of battle was set. The autumn sun had barely risen, and the troops would march within the hour.

Grey was in the stable block, checking Karolus's tack, tightening the girth, adjusting the bridle, marking second by second the time until he should depart, as though each second marked an irretrievable and most precious drop of his life.

Outside the stables, all was confusion, as people ran hither and thither, gathering belongings, searching for children, calling for wives and parents, strewing away objects gathered only moments before, heedless in their distraction. His heart beat fast in his chest, and intermittent small thrills coursed up the backs of his legs and curled between them, tightening his scrotum.

The drums were beating in the distance, ordering the troops. The thrum of them beat in his blood, in his bone. Soon, soon, soon. His chest was tight; it was difficult to draw full breath.

He did not hear the footsteps approaching through the straw of the stables. Keyed up as he was, though, he felt the disturbance of air nearby, that intimation of intrusion that now and then had saved his life, and whirled, hand on his dagger.

It was Stephan von Namtzen, gaudy in full uniform, his great plumed helmet underneath one arm—but with a face sober by contrast to his clothing.

"It is nearly time," the Hanoverian said quietly. "I would speak with you—if you will hear me."

Grey slowly let his hand fall away from the dagger, and took the full breath he had been longing for.

"You know that I will."

Von Namtzen inclined his head in acknowledgment, but did not speak at once, seeming to need to gather his words—although they were speaking German now.

"I will marry Louisa," he said, finally, formally. "If I live until

Christmas. My children—" He hesitated, free hand flat upon the breast of his coat. "It will be good they should have a mother once more. And—"

"You need not give reasons," Grey interrupted. He smiled at the big Hanoverian, with open affection. Caution was no longer necessary. "If you wish this, then I wish you well."

Von Namtzen's face lightened. He ducked his head a little, and took a breath.

"Danke. I say, I will marry if I am alive. If I am not ..." His hand still rested on his breast, above the miniature of his children.

"If I live, and you do not, then I will go to your home," Grey said. "I will tell your son what I have known of you. Is this your desire?"

The Hanoverian's graveness did not alter, but a deep warmth softened his gray eyes.

"It is. You have known me, perhaps, better than anyone."

He stood still, looking at Grey, and all at once, the relentless marking of fleeting time stopped. Confusion and danger still hastened without, and drums beat loud, but inside the stables, there was a great peace.

Stephan's hand left his breast, and reached out. Grey took it, and felt love flow between them. He thought that heart and body must be entirely melted—if only for that moment.

Then they parted, each drawing back, each seeing the flash of desolation in the other's face, both smiling ruefully to see it.

Stephan was turning to go when Grey remembered.

"Wait!" he called, and turned to fumble in his saddlebag.

"What is this?" Stephan turned the small, heavy box over in his hands, looking puzzled.

"A charm," Grey said, smiling. "A blessing. My blessing—and St. Orgevald's. May it protect you."

"But—" Von Namtzen frowned with doubt, and tried to give the reliquary back, but Grey would not accept it.

"Believe me," he said in English, "it will do you more good than me."

Stephan looked at him for a moment longer, then nodded, and, tucking the little box away in his pocket, turned and left. Grey turned back to Karolus, who was growing restive, tossing his head and snorting softly through his nose.

The horse stamped, hard, and the vibration of it ran through the long bones of Grey's legs.

"Hast thou given the horse strength?" he quoted softly, hand stroking the braided mane that ran smooth and serpentlike down the great ridge of the stallion's neck. "Hast thou clothed his neck with thunder?... He paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in his strength: he goeth on to meet the armed men. He mocketh at fear, and is not affrighted; neither turneth he back from the sword."

He leaned close and pressed his forehead against the horse's shoulder. Huge muscles bulged beneath the skin, warm and eager, and the clean musky scent of the horse's excitement filled him. He straightened then, and slapped the taut, twitching hide.

"He saith among the trumpets, Ha, ha; and he smelleth the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting."

Grey heard the drums again, and his palms began to sweat.

Historical Note: In October of 1757, the forces of Frederick the Great and his allies moved swiftly, crossing the country to defeat the gathering French and Austrian army at Rossbach, in Saxony. The town of Gundwitz was left undisturbed, the bridge at Aschenwald never crossed by an enemy.

"Lord John and the Haunted Soldier"



"Haunted Soldier" was actually written specifically for this collection, and has (so far) not been published anywhere else.

The chronology of Lord John Grey stories (to date) is as follows:

"Lord John and the Hellfire Club" (short story)

Lord John and the Private Matter (novel)

"Lord John and the Succubus" (novella)

Lord John and the Brotherhood of the Blade (novel)

"Lord John and the Haunted Soldier" (novella)

So, if you have this volume and the two novels, you're in great shape!

There is a third Lord John novel to come—titled *Lord John and the Scottish Prisoner*—but this is not yet written.



LORD JOHN

and the Haunted Soldier



Part I



Inquisition

November, 1758 Tower Place, the Arsenal at Woolwich

Hell was filled with clocks, he was sure of it. There was no torment, after all, that could not be exacerbated by a contemplation of time passing. The large case clock at the end of the corridor had a particularly penetrating *tick-tock*, audible above and through all the noises of the house and its inhabitants. It seemed to Lord John Grey to echo his own inexorable heartbeats, each one a step on the road toward death.

He shook off that grisly notion and sat bolt upright, his best hat balanced upon his knee. The house had once been a mansion; doubtless the clock was a remnant of those gracious days. Pity none of the chairs had made the transition to government service, he thought, shifting gingerly on the niggardly stool he'd been given.

A spasm of impatience brought him to his feet. Why would they not bloody call him in and get on with it?

Well, there was a rhetorical question, he thought, tapping the hat against his leg with soft impatience.

If *The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small* was not the official motto of His Majesty's government, it was surely that, *de facto*. It had taken months for the Royal Commission of Inquiry to be convened, still longer for it to sit, and longer yet for inquisition to stretch out its hand in his direction.

His arm and ribs were quite healed now, the furrow through his scalp no more than a thin white scar beneath his hair. The freezing rain of November beat upon the roof above; in Germany the thick grass around the ninth station of the cross must lie now brown and dead, and the lieutenant who lay beneath that grass food for worms long since. Yet here Grey sat—or stood—a small, hard kernel yet awaiting the pressure of the grindstone.

Grimacing, he sought respite from the clock's ticking by striding up and down the corridor, returning the censorious looks of the row of portraits hung upon the wall as he passed them—early governors of the Arsenal.

The portraits were mediocre in execution for the most part, save the one near the end, done by a more talented hand. Perhaps a Dutchman by his looks—a black-browed gentleman whose fiercely rubicund features radiated a jolly determination. Probably a good attitude for one whose profession was explosion.

As though the Dutchman agreed with this sentiment, a tremendous boom rattled the casement at the end of the corridor and the floor heaved suddenly under Grey's feet.

He flung himself flat, hat flying, and found himself hugging the shabby hall-runner, sweating and breathless.

"My lord?" A voice from which any trace of astonishment or curiosity had been carefully removed spoke above him. "The gentlemen are ready."

"Are they? In ... deed." He rose, stilling the trembling of his limbs by main effort, and brushed the dust from his uniform with what nonchalance could be managed.

"If you will follow me, my lord?" The functionary, a small, neatly wigged person of impeccable politeness and indeterminate aspect, bent to pick up Grey's hat, and handing it to him without comment, turned to lead him back down the corridor. Behind them, the clock ticked imperturbably on, the passage of time undisturbed by such ephemera as explosion or death.



There were three of them, seated behind a long table, a weighty thing of carved dark wood. To one side, a clerk sat at a small desk, quill and paper at the ready to record his testimony. A single chair was placed, stark and solitary, in the space before the table.

So it really was an inquisition, he thought. His brother Hal had warned him. His sense of unease grew stronger. The trouble with an inquisition was that it seldom went hungry to bed.

The black-coated functionary accompanied him to the chair, hovering at his elbow as though afraid he might bolt, and left him

there with a murmured "Major Grey" and a discreet bow in the direction of the Commission of Inquiry. They did not bother to introduce themselves. The tall, thin-faced fellow was vaguely familiar; a nobleman, he thought—knight, perhaps a minor baronet? Expensively tailored in gray superfine. The name escaped him, though perhaps it would come of itself in time.

He did recognize the military member of the tribunal: Colonel Twelvetrees, of the Royal Artillery Regiment, wearing his dress uniform and an expression that spoke of habitual severity. From what Grey knew of his reputation, the expression was well earned. That could be dealt with, though; *yes, sir, no, sir, three bags full, sir.*

The third was less forbidding in aspect, a middle-aged gentleman, plump and neat in purple, with a striped waistcoat and a small decoration; he went so far as to smile politely at Grey. Grey removed his hat and bowed to His Majesty's Royal Commission of Inquiry, but did not sit 'til he was bidden to do so.

The colonel cleared his throat then and began without preamble.

"You are summoned here, Major, to assist us in an inquiry into the explosion of a cannon whilst under your command during the battle at Crefeld in Prussia, on twenty-third June of this year. You will answer all questions put to you, in as much detail as may be required."

"Yes, sir." He sat bolt upright, face impassive.

A sort of rumble ran through the building, felt rather than heard, and the droplets on a small crystal chandelier tinkled gently overhead. The huge proving grounds of the Arsenal lay somewhere beyond the Tower Place house, he knew—how far away?

The plump gentleman put a pair of spectacles on his nose and leaned forward expectantly.

"Will you tell us, please, my lord, the circumstances in which you came to take charge of the gun and its crew?"

Obediently, he told them, in the words he had prepared. Colorless, brief, exact. Allowing of no doubt. Had any of them ever set foot on a battlefield, he wondered? If they had, they would know how little resemblance his words held to the truth of that day—but it hardly mattered. He spoke for the record, and was therefore careful.

They interrupted now and then, asking trivial questions about the position of the gun upon the field, the proximity of the French cavalry at the time, the weather—what in God's name might the weather have had to do with it? he wondered.

The clerk scratched industriously away, recording it all.

"You had had previous experience in fighting a gun of this type?" That was the roundish gentleman with the striped waistcoat and the discreet decoration. The baronet had called him Oswald, and suddenly he realized who the man must be—the Honorable Mortimer Oswald, Member of Parliament. He'd seen the name on posters and banners during the last election.

"I had."

Oswald cocked an eyebrow, plainly inviting him to elaborate, but he kept silent.

Twelvetrees fixed him with a cold eye.

"With which regiment, when, how long?"

Blast.

"I served informally with the Forty-sixth, sir—my brother's regiment—Lord Melton, that is—during the Jacobite campaign in Scotland under General Cope. Was detailed to a gun crew belonging to the Royal Artillery after taking up my commission, and trained there for six months before coming back to the Forty-sixth. More recently, I was seconded to a Hanoverian regiment in Germany, and saw service there with a Prussian artillery company."

He saw no need to add that this service had consisted largely of eating sausages with the gun crew. And as for his so-called service with Cope ... the less said about that, the better. He had, however, actually commanded the firing of cannon, which the members of the board very likely had not, Twelvetrees included.

"Cope?" said the baronet, seeming to rouse a bit at the name. "Gentleman Johnny?" He laughed, and the colonel's hatchet face tightened.

"Yes, sir." Oh, God. Please God, he hadn't heard the story.

Apparently not; the man merely hummed a snatch of that mocking Scotch song, "Hey, Johnny Cope, are ye walkin' yet?" and broke off, looking amused.

"Cope," he repeated, shaking his head. "You must have been very young at the time, Major?"

"Sixteen, sir." He felt his blood rise and his cheeks flush. Nearly half a lifetime. Dear God, how long would he have to live, in order to escape the memory of Prestonpans, and goddamned Jamie Fraser?

Twelvetrees was not amused, and cast a cold glance at the nobleman.

"Had you commanded a gun in battle, prior to Crefeld?" Bloody-

minded sod.

"Yes, sir," Grey replied, keeping his voice calm. "At Falkirk." They'd put him in charge of a gun and allowed him to fire several shots at an abandoned church before retreating, for the sake of practice.

Oswald emitted a hum of interest.

"And what sort of gun did you command on that occasion, Major?"

"A murderer, sir," he replied, naming a small and very old-fashioned cannon, left over from the last century.

"Not quite so murderous as Tom Pilchard, though, eh, Major?"

He must have looked as blank as he felt, for Oswald kindly elaborated.

"The gun you served at Crefeld, Major. You did not know its name?"

"No, sir," he said, and could not help adding, "we were not formally introduced, owing to the circumstances."

He knew before he said it that it was a mistake, but nerves and irritation had got the best of him; the constant thumping from the proving ground beyond the house made the floor shake every few minutes, and sweat was running down his sides inside his shirt. The price of his momentary lapse was a blistering ten-minute lecture from Twelvetrees on respect for the army—in the person of himself, he gathered—and the dignity of His Majesty's commission. All the while Grey sat upright as a ramrod, saying, "Yes, sir," and "No, sir," with a countenance of perfect blankness, and Oswald wheezed with open amusement.

The baronet waited through the colonel's tirade with ill-concealed impatience, stripping the barbs from his quill one by one, so that tiny feathers strewed the table and flew up in a cloud as he drummed his fingers.

From the corner of his eye, Grey saw the clerk lean back, looking faintly entertained. The man rubbed his ink-stained fingers, clearly grateful for the momentary break in the proceedings.

When at last the colonel subsided—with a final ugly jab at his brother, his brother's regiment, and Grey's late father—the baronet cleared his throat with a menacing growl and sat forward to take his own turn.

Grey was inclined to think that the growl was aimed as much at Twelvetrees as at himself—noblemen did not like to hear others of their ilk rubbished in public, regardless of circumstance. The lack of amity among the members of the commission had become increasingly apparent during the questioning, but that observation was of little value to him personally.

The clerk, seeing the end of his brief vacation, picked up his quill again with an audible sigh.

Marchmont—that was it! Lord Marchmont—he was a baronet—set about a brisk dissection of Grey's experience, background, education, and family, ending with a sudden pointed inquiry as to when Grey had last seen Edgar DeVane.

"Edgar DeVane?" Grey repeated blankly.

"Your brother, I believe?" Marchmont said, with elaborate patience.

"Yes, sir," Grey said respectfully, thinking, What the devil ...? Edgar? "I beg pardon, sir. Your question took me unexpectedly. I believe I last saw my half brother"—he leaned a little on the words—"near Christmas last." He remembered the occasion, certainly; Edgar's wife, Maude, had badgered her husband into bringing the family to London for a month, and Grey had accompanied her and her two daughters in their raids on the Regent and Bond Street shops, in the capacity of native bearer. He recalled thinking at the time that Edgar's affairs must be prospering markedly; either that, or he would return to Sussex bankrupt.

He waited. Marchmont squinted at him, tapping the mangled quill on the papers in front of him.

"Christmas," the baronet repeated. "Have you been in correspondence with DeVane since then?"

"No," he replied promptly. While he assumed that Edgar was in fact literate, he'd never seen anything of a written nature purporting to emanate from his half brother. His mother kept up a dutiful correspondence with all four of her sons, but the Sussex half of that particular exchange was sustained entirely by the efforts of Maude.

"Christmas," Marchmont repeated again, frowning. "And when had you last seen DeVane, prior to that?"

"I do not recall, sir; my apologies."

"Oh, now, I am afraid that won't do, my lord." Oswald was still looking genial, but light glittered from his spectacles. "We must insist upon an answer."

A louder than usual boom from beyond the house made the clerk start in his seat and grab for his inkwell. Grey might easily have started likewise, were he not so taken aback by this sudden insistence upon his half brother's whereabouts and relations with himself. He could only conclude that the commission had lost its collective mind. Twelvetrees added his own bit to this impression, glowering at him under iron-gray brows.

"We are waiting, Major."

Ought he to choose some date at random? he wondered. Would they investigate to discover whether he told the truth?

Knowing what sort of response it might provoke, he replied firmly, "I am sorry, sir. I see Edgar DeVane very infrequently; prior to last Christmas, I suppose that it might have been more than a year—two, perhaps—since I have spoken to him."

"Or written?" Marchmont pounced.

He didn't know that, either, but there was much less chance that anyone could prove him wrong.

"I think that I may have written to him when—" His words were drowned out by the whistle of some large missile, very near at hand, followed by a tremendous crash. He kept himself in his chair only by seizing the seat of it with both hands, and gulped air to keep his voice from shaking. "—when I was seconded to the Graf von Namtzen's regiment. That—that would have been in—in—'57."

"Can they not still that infernal racket?" Marchmont's nerves seemed also to have become frayed by the bombardment. He sat upright and slapped a hand on the table. "Mr. Simpson!"

The black-coated functionary appeared in the doorway with an inquiring look.

"Tell them to stop banging away out there, for God's sake," the baronet said peevishly.

"I am afraid that the Ordnance Office is a power unto itself, my lord," Simpson said, shaking his head sadly at the thought of such intransigence.

"Perhaps we might dismiss the major until a more congenial time —" Oswald began, but Twelvetrees snapped, "Nonsense!" at him, and turned his minatory gaze on Grey once more.

The colonel said something, but was drowned out by a barrage of bangs and pops, as though the Ordnance fellows proposed to emphasize their independence. Grey's blood was roaring in his ears, his leather stock tight round his throat. He dug his fingers hard into the wood of the chair.

"With all respect, sir," he said, as firmly as he might, disregarding whatever it was that Twelvetrees had asked. "I have little regular contact with my half brother. I cannot tell you more than I have."

Marchmont uttered an audible "hmp!" of disbelief, and Twelvetrees

glared as though he wished to order Grey strung up to a triangle and flogged on the spot. Oswald, though, peered closely at him over the tops of his spectacles, and in a sudden, blessed silence from the proving ground, changed the subject.

"Were you intimately acquainted with Lieutenant Lister prior to the occasion at Crefeld, my lord?" he asked mildly.

"I am not familiar with that name at all, sir." He could surmise who Lister was, of course, who he must have been.

"You surprise me, Major," said Oswald, looking not at all surprised. "Philip Lister was a member of White's, as you are yourself. I should think you must have seen him there now and then, whether you knew his name or not?"

Grey wasn't surprised that Oswald knew that he belonged to White's club; all of London had heard about his last visit there. He didn't haunt the place, though, preferring the Beefsteak.

Rather than endeavor to detail his social habits, he merely replied, "That is possible. However, the lieutenant had been struck by a cannonball, sir, which unfortunately removed his head. I had no opportunity of examining his features in order to ascertain whether he might be an acquaintance."

Marchmont glanced at him sharply.

"Are you being impertinent, sir?"

"Certainly not, sir." All three of them looked suddenly at him as one, like a phalanx of owls eyeing a mouse. A drop of sweat wormed its slow way down his back, itching.

Twelvetrees coughed explosively and the illusion was broken. With bewildering suddenness, they resumed questioning him about the battle.

"How long had you been fighting the gun when it exploded?" Marchmont asked, drumming his fingers on the table.

"Roughly half an hour, sir." *No idea, sir. Seemed all day, sir.* Couldn't have been, though; the battle itself had taken no more than three or four hours. So he'd been told, later.

He realized, with a faint sense of nightmare, that his hands were beginning to tremble, and as unobtrusively as possible, curled them into fists on his knees.

They returned to the battle, making him go through it again, and once more, and then again: the number of men in the gun crew, their separate offices, how the gun was aimed—a pause, while he explained to a frowning Marchmont exactly what quoins were and that, no, the

placement of these wooden wedges beneath the cannon's trunnions affected nothing more than the altitude of the barrel, and could not possibly have contributed to the explosion—what shot had they been using—grapeshot, for the most part—what was the fucking weather like, which member of the crew had been killed—the loader, he didn't know the man's name—and exactly who had put the linstock to the touchhole during that last, fateful firing?

He clung to the colorless, rehearsed words of his testimony, a feeble shield against memory.

A faint haze of smoke from the proving ground had seeped through the cracks of the windows and hung near the egg-and-dart molding of the ceiling, gray as the rain clouds outside.

His left arm ached where it had been broken.

Sweat ran over his ribs, slow as seeping blood.

The ground shook under him, and he felt in his bones the invisible presence of Prussian dragon-riders.

He wished to God they had not told him Lister's name.

The thump and rumble of distant explosion had resumed. He began to try to identify the sounds as a means of distraction, wondering, *An eight? Or a coehorn?* at a series of regular, hollow thumps, or thinking with more confidence, *Twenty-four pounder*, when the chandelier rattled overhead.

"It rained in the night," he repeated for the fourth time, "but it was not raining heavily during the battle, no, sir."

"Your vision was not obscured, then?"

Only by the sweat burning in his eyes and the billows of black powder smoke that drifted like thunderclouds over the field.

"No, sir."

"You were not distracted in mind?"

He gripped his knees.

"No, sir."

"So you claim," Marchmont said, with distinct skepticism. "Do you not think it possible—or even likely, Major—that in the heat of battle, you might conceivably have ordered your crew to load a second charge before firing the first? I think such an eventuality would have provided an explosion of sufficient force as to rupture the cannon, would it not, Colonel?" He leaned a little forward, raising an interrogative brow at Twelvetrees, who looked more po-faced than usual, but nodded.

A small smirk of satisfaction oiled Lord Marchmont's lips, as he

looked back at Grey.

"Major?"

Grey felt a sharp jolt in the pit of his stomach. He'd come expecting official tedium, the meticulous dissection of accident required by those whose business such things were. He hadn't looked forward either to the endless questions or to the inescapable reliving of the events at Crefeld—but the last thing he'd expected was this.

"Do I understand you aright, my lord?" he asked carefully. "Do you insinuate—do you *dare* to insinuate—that I ... that my actions *caused* the explosion which—"

"Oh, no, oh, no!" Oswald leapt in hurriedly, seeing Grey draw himself up. "I am quite sure his lordship insinuates nothing." But Grey was already on his feet.

The clerk looked up, startled. There was a smut on his nose.

"Good day, my lord, gentlemen." Grey bowed, jammed the hat on his head, and turned on his heel.

"Major! You have not been dismissed!"

Ignoring the outbreak of exclamations and orders behind him, he strode beneath the trembling chandelier and out the door.



Grey was so exercised in mind that he took no notice at all of his surroundings. Emerging into the portrait hallway, he did not wait to be shown out, but stamped off via the most direct route that presented itself. In consequence, he found himself a few moments later outside the house, in the midst of a raging downpour, but with Bell Street, where he had come in, nowhere in sight.

He paused, breathing heavily, thought of skulking back into the manor house to ask direction, dismissed that notion instanter, and looked round for an alternate means of egress.

He was surrounded by a cluster of smaller buildings, mostly wet brick, roofed with rain-slick slates, and with a profusion of small, muddy lanes leading to and fro among them.

No wonder they called the bloody place "the Warren," he thought grimly, and was inclined to find his present confusion merely a continuation of the morning's aggravation. He chose a direction at random and set off, cursing the Arsenal and all its works. Ten minutes of tramping through rain and mud left his clothes wet, his boots fouled, and his temper fouler, but he was no closer to escape. A shattering *boom!* from very close at hand made him veer suddenly sideways, fetching up against one of the myriad brick buildings, heart thundering in his chest. He pressed a hand hard over it, and tried without effect to calm his breathing.

His hands and feet were chilled to the bone, but he felt fresh sweat trickle down his ribs, further dampening his already clammy linen. Not that it mattered; he would be soaked to the skin in another few minutes.

"Oh, the devil with it," he muttered to himself, and seizing the nearest door handle in sight, shoved it open.

He found himself in a low-ceilinged room that smelt strongly of sulfur, hot metal, and other noxious substances. It did, however, have a fire in the hearth, and he headed for this like a racing pigeon homing to its cot.

He slung his cloak forward over his shoulder and closed his eyes in momentary bliss at the feel of heat on his legs and backside.

A sound caused him to open his eyes, and he saw that the noise of his entry had attracted a young man, presently gaping at him from a door on the far side of the room.

"Sir?" said the young man tentatively, taking in Grey's uniform. The young man himself was in shirtsleeves and breeches, a slender chap with dark, curly hair and a face of almost girlish delicacy, perhaps a few years younger than himself.

"I beg your pardon for my unseemly intrusion," Grey said, letting his cloak fall and forcing a smile. "I am Major John Grey. I was unfortunately—" He had begun some explanation of his presence, but the young man's eyes forestalled him with an exclamation of surprise.

"Major Grey! Why, I know you!"

"You do?" For some reason, this made Grey somewhat uneasy.

"But of course, of course! Or rather," the young man corrected himself, "I know your name. You were called before the commission this morning, were you not?"

"I was," Grey said shortly, fury returning at the memory.

"Oh—but I forget myself; your pardon; sir. I am Herbert Gormley." He bobbed an awkward bow, which Grey returned, with mutual murmurs of "your servant, sir."

Glancing round, he saw that the strong odors came from an assortment of pots and glass vessels scattered higgledy-piggledy across

an assortment of tables and benches. Wisps of steam rose from a small earthen pot on the table nearest him.

"Could that be tea?" Grey asked dubiously.

It could. Gormley, clearly grateful for the opportunity to be hospitable, snatched up a filthy cloth, and using this as a pot holder, poured hot liquid into a pottery mug, which he handed to Grey.

The tea was the same grayish color as the mud on his boots, and the smell led him to suspect that the mug was not employed strictly as a drinking vessel—but it was hot, and that was all that mattered.

"Er ... what is this place?" Grey inquired, emerging from the mug and waving at their surroundings.

"This is the Royal Laboratory, sir!" Gormley said, straightening his back with an air of pride. "If you please, sir? I'll fetch someone directly; he will be so excited!"

Before Grey could speak to stop him, Gormley had darted back into the recesses of the building.

Grey's uneasy feeling returned. Excited? The revelation that everyone in the Warren seemed to have heard about his appearance before the commission was sufficiently sinister. That anyone should be excited about it was unsettling.

In Grey's not inconsiderable experience, for a soldier to be talked about was a good thing only if the conversation were in reference to some laudable feat of arms. Otherwise, a prudent man kept his head down, lest it be—this unwary thought evoked a sudden memory of Lieutenant Lister, and he shuddered convulsively, slopping hot tea over his knuckles.

He set the cup down and wiped his hand on his cloak, debating the wisdom of absquatulating before Gormley returned with his "someone"—but the rain was now slashing ferociously at the shutters, driven by a freezing east wind, and he hesitated an instant too long.

"Major Grey?" A dark, burly soldier in a Royal Artillery captain's uniform emerged, a look of mingled welcome and wariness upon his heavy face. "Captain Reginald Jones, sir. May I welcome you to our humble abode?" He offered his hand, tilting his head in irony toward the cluttered room.

"I am obliged to you, sir, both for shelter from the storm and for the kind refreshment," Grey replied, taking both the offered hand and advantage of the pounding rain to indicate his reason for intrusion.

"Oh, you did not come in response to my invitation?" Jones had thick brows, like woolly caterpillars, which arched themselves in inquiry.

"Invitation?" Grey repeated, the sense of unease returning. "I received no invitation, Captain, though I assure you—"

"I did tell you, sir," Gormley said reproachfully to the captain. "When I took your note across to the manor, they said I had just missed the major, who had already left."

"Oh, so you did, so you did, Herbert," Jones said, smacking himself theatrically on the forehead. "Well, then, it seems good luck or Providence has delivered you to us, Major."

"Indeed," Grey said warily. "Why?"

Captain Jones smiled warmly at him.

"Why, Major, we have something to show you."



He had no time to dwell upon the Commission, at least.

It was a long gallop from the laboratory, through a maze of smaller outbuildings and sheds, then into what Gormley—shouting to be heard above the noise of rain and hammering—told him was the Royal Brass Foundry, a large, airy stone and brick building, through whose archways Lord John glimpsed strange marvels: casting pits, boring machines, a gigantic beam scale large enough to weigh a horse ... and a horse. Two, to be accurate, their wet flanks gleaming as they backed a wagon filled with barrels of clay and burlap bags of sand in through the high vestibule door.

The air was thick with the scents of wet rope, drying clay, hot wax, tallow, fresh manure, and the acrid, fiery odors of an unseen forge somewhere in the recesses of the place. Gormley shouted brief descriptions of the various activities they passed, but Jones was leading the way at the double-quick, and Grey had barely time to inhale the fascinating aromas of gun-founding before he found himself propelled once more into the open air and the cold smell of rain on stone, tinged with a miasma of rot and ordure from the prison hulks on the river nearby.

The air shivered periodically with explosion; they were drawing nearer to the proving grounds. The bangs echoed in the hollow of his stomach. Jesus, they weren't going to try to make him reenact the events leading up to the demise of Tom Pilchard, surely? The pitted landscape of the proving grounds stretched away to the left; he could see it now. Acres of open ground punctuated by earthen bunkers, outposts of heaped sandbags, and tents of various shapes and sizes, canvas darkened by the rain. Here and there, the glint of muted light on the barrels of the bigger guns.

To his relief, though, Jones veered right and down a muddy path lined with the dismounted carcasses of ruined guns, neatly laid out like dead bodies.

He had no time to study them, but was impressed by both their number—there must be fifty, at least—and by the size of some. There must be half a dozen cannon royal, whose monstrous barrels weighed eight thousand pounds or more and must be drawn by a dozen horses.

Ahead lay a very large, open-sided shelter, roofed with canvas. Long tables lay bleak under the canvas, covered with debris. Here lay half a Spanish culverin, the breech blown off. There the twisted remains of a short gun he could not identify.

The thump of a fresh explosion reached him, muffled only slightly by the rain that drummed on the canvas overhead as he followed Gormley into the shelter.

"Why do they test ordnance in the rain?" he asked, to cover his unease, and by way of making conversation.

"Do you not sometimes fight in the rain, my lord?" Gormley sounded amused. "Useful to have bombs and grenades that will still explode when the casing is wet, don't you think?"

"Ah ... quite." The Commission's harping insistence upon the weather at Crefeld seemed suddenly to acquire some meaning. Likewise their insistent questioning regarding his perceptions of the powder ... Edgar. Goddammit, Edgar!

It was the juxtaposition of his half brother with the notion of gunpowder that finally triggered realization.

Rain would certainly dampen the firing powder, no matter what precautions were taken. Normally, damp was less of a problem with the bombs and grapeshot cartridges, they being well wrapped, but even these would now and then fail to explode. A certain number of them simply failed to explode in any case, weather notwithstanding. And when this happened, the dummy charge must be removed from the breech before a fresh load was rammed down the barrel. Otherwise, the impact itself might cause the faulty load to go off. Or—he remembered Marchmont's accusation with a fresh surge of fury—a hasty or incompetent gun crew occasionally *did* neglect to remove the

faulty load, ram a fresh one, and then touch off both charges together, which might indeed fracture a gun.

And Edgar owned a powder mill. The insinuation, he supposed, was that Edgar's mill had supplied dud powder, which had by coincidence been used to make the grapeshot cartridges he had used in Crefeld. One of these failing to go off, his own inattention or stupidity had ... But this was the sheerest idiocy, even for someone like Marchmont. What—

But these fevered speculations were interrupted as Jones came to an abrupt halt beside one of the tables and turned, looking expectant.

The table was littered with shattered chunks of verdigrised and blackened brass. It had been a large cannon, a twenty-four pounder; most of the barrel forward of the trunnions was intact. And it was an English cannon—the royal cypher of George the Second showed clearly, though the reinforcing band upon which it was stamped had cracked through and the breech of the gun lay in a rubble of twisted pieces, blackened with powder.

"Do you recognize it, Major?" Gormley asked.

Grey felt an odd sense of shock, and something strangely like sorrow, as he might for an unknown soldier blown to bits beside him. Would he care, he wondered, if he didn't now know the gun by name?

"Tom Pilchard, is it?" He reached out and touched the broken barrel, gently.

"Yes, sir." The young man seemed to share his sense of loss; he bowed his head respectfully, and spoke with lowered voice, as one might at the bier of a friend. "I thought you might wish to see him, sir —or what's left."

Grey glanced at Gormley, rather surprised—and caught sight of Captain Jones on the far side of the table, staring at him intently. Blank puzzlement was succeeded by a fresh wave of anger, as realization struck him. God damn them, they'd brought him to view the carcass in order to see whether he might betray some manifestation of guilt!

He hoped no sign of his fury showed on his face. Heart thumping, he moved slowly down the table, examining the wreckage.

They had laid out the broken chunks in rough order, a giant bronze clutter of jagged pieces. Near the shattered butt, he caught sight of an oddly curved piece, and despite his awareness of Jones's scrutiny, put out a hand to it.

It was what remained of a leopard, couchant, part of the

ornamentation from one of the cannon's dolphins. No more than the head remained, split right through. The face snarled intact on one side of the small chunk of metal, ear laid back. The other side was broken, the pitted brass already greening.

"My lord?" Gormley's voice was questioning. Paying no attention, Grey reached into his pocket and drew out a small piece of bronze, smoothly cast on one side, rough on the other. It was heavy in his hand, dark, clean, and cold. The last time he'd held it thus, it had been still warm from his body, and darker yet, slick with his blood.

There was a murmur of interest and excitement. Gormley leaned close to see, and Captain Jones, in his haste to look, too, caught his hip a wallop on the corner of the table, making the pieces of the cannon rumble and clang. Grey hoped it would leave a bruise.

"Where did you get that, Major?" Jones asked, rubbing his hip as he nodded at the fragment Grey held.

"The surgeon who removed it from my chest gave it me," Grey answered, very cool. "A memento of my survival."

"May I?" Gormley extended a hand, face eager.

Grey wished to refuse, but a glimpse of Jones's hard interest prevented him. He tightened his lips and handed the cat's face to Gormley. Cupping the larger remnant in his hand, the young man fitted the smaller one to it, restoring the leopard's head.

Gormley made a small noise of pleasure at adding this bit to his jagged puzzle. Grey was more interested at what was still missing.

There was a dark crack between the halves of the leopard's head, where a two-inch sliver of metal was still missing. Missing, but not gone. He still retained *that* small souvenir of his brief acquaintance with Tom Pilchard—lodged somewhere in the depths of his chest. He was interested to see the dimensions of it—longer than he'd thought, but very slender—no more than a hair's width at the narrower end.

The surgeon, digging through his chest with urgent fingers, had touched the end of the bronze splinter but been unable to take hold of it with forceps in order to draw it out—and after prolonged consultation with his learned German colleague, had decided that to leave it *in situ* was less risk than to attempt removal by cutting through his ribs and opening his chest.

Grey had been in no condition to contribute to that debate, nor did he remember everything they'd done to him, but he recalled—and with no sense of shame whatever—the warmth of tears running down his face at the news that they did not propose to hurt him any more. He hadn't wept through all that terrible day, nor the ones that went before it. The dissolution, when it came, had been a blessing, acknowledgment of mourning for the lost, acceptance of what remained of his life.

"Major Grey?" He became aware that Gormley was squinting curiously at him, and shook off his memories abruptly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I only asked, sir—when the gun blew up, did you hear anything?"

The question was so incongruous that he actually laughed.

"Did I hear anything? Beyond the explosion, you mean?"

"Well, what I mean, sir ..." Gormley struggled for clarity. "Did you hear just a loud bang, same as you would when the gun was fired? Or perhaps *two* bangs, right close together? Or a bang, and then a ... clang? Metal, I mean." He hesitated. "I mean ... did you hear the sound of the gun breaking?"

Grey looked at him, arrested.

"Yes," he said slowly. "I believe I did. A bang and a clang, as you put it. So close together, though ... I couldn't swear ..."

"Well, they would be," Gormley said eagerly. "Now, what I understand, sir—this wasn't your regular gun?"

Grey shook his head.

"No. I'd never seen it before."

Gormley—Grey could not help thinking of him as "Gormless," the name was so the opposite of his small, quick cleverness—creased his narrow brow in a frown.

"How many times did it fire before it exploded?"

"I have no idea," Grey answered shortly. This was beginning to echo the bloody inquisition he'd been through half an hour before, and he had no intention of repeating himself *ad infinitum* to a series of questioners of descending seniority. To forestall more questions, he seized the moment to ask his own.

"What are those?" He pointed to the broken barrel where several half circles scalloped the edge, quite unlike the jagged shear of the rest.

To his surprise, Gormley stiffened and glanced uneasily at Jones, who gave the young man a flat, blank sort of look.

"Oh. That's ... nothing, sir."

The devil it is, thought Grey. But he had had enough of mystifications and dark hints. Moved by impulse, he picked up the smaller fragment of the leopard's head, restored it to his pocket, and

bowed to Jones and Gormley.

"I have business elsewhere, gentlemen. I bid you good day."

He turned on his heel, ignoring cries of protest. To his surprise, Captain Jones positively sprinted after him, catching him by the sleeve at the edge of the shelter.

"You can't take that!"

Grey glanced at the captain's hand on his sleeve, keeping his eyes fixed there, until Jones's grip relaxed.

"I beg your pardon, Major," Jones said stiffly, standing back. "But you must leave that bit of metal here."

"Why?" Grey lifted a brow. "The fragments will be melted down, surely?" Such a small bit of brass couldn't be worth the tenth part of a farthing.

Jones looked taken aback for an instant, but rapidly regained his confidence.

"That bit of metal," he said in severe tones, "is the property of His Majesty!"

"Of course it is," Grey agreed cordially. "And when His Majesty likes to ask me for it, I shall be quite happy to give it to him. For the moment, though, I shall keep it safe."

Taking a deep breath in preparation, he wrapped the edges of his cloak around himself, pulled his hat well down, and dived into the rain. Jones didn't follow.



He had a decent sense of direction and was used to finding his way through foreign towns and open country alike. Keeping in mind the directions Gormley had given him as they sped through the Warren, he was able to find his way back past the maze of the proving grounds to the foundry, pausing only now and then to take his bearings.

The din in the foundry seemed almost welcoming, a cheerful, self-absorbed racket that was completely uninterested in Major Grey and his experiences on the battlefield at Crefeld. He paused for a moment to watch a moulder beating with an iron rod at a great heap of clay that sat on a bench before him, while an assistant shoveled handsful of horse dung and wool clippings into the mix, counting as he did so.

In the next bay, men were winding rope carefully round a tapered

wooden spindle, some ten feet long, that sat in a sort of large trough, suspended in notches at either end—the cannon mould to which the clay would be applied, he supposed.

"Beg pardon, sir." A young man appeared out of nowhere, pushing him politely aside in order to retrieve a bucket of soft soap, which he then rushed back and began daubing onto the tight-packed grooves of the rope with a large brush.

He would have liked to loiter and watch, but he was clearly in the way; already, men were glancing at him, curiosity mingled with a mild hostility at his unuseful presence.

The rain had at least slackened; he walked out of the main foundry building, his hand curled round the fragment of brass in his pocket, thinking of that missing sliver.

For the most part, he was unaware of it, and often forgot its presence altogether. Now and then, though, some postural shift would send a brief, piercing pain through his chest, freezing him in place. The English surgeon, Dr. Longstreet, had told him that there might remain some harmless irritation of the nerves, but that the spasms would eventually pass.

The German surgeon, evidently unaware of Grey's fluency in that language, had agreed, but remarked in his own tongue that there was of course a slight possibility of the sliver's turning suddenly, in which case it might pierce the pericardium, whatever that was.

But no need to think of that, he had concluded cheerfully, as if so, he will be dead almost at once.

He had recalled Gormley's directions aright; directly ahead was what the young man had called Dial Arch. Beyond that lay Dial Square, and beyond that in turn he should find the exit he sought to Bell Street, where, no doubt, his long-suffering valet was still waiting for him.

He smiled wryly at thought of Tom Byrd. He had insisted that there was no need for his valet to accompany him all the way out to Woolwich—it was ten miles, at least—but Byrd would not hear of his going out alone. Tom, bless him, had scarcely let him go anywhere alone since his return from Germany, fearing—and with some reason, Grey was grudgingly forced to admit—that he might collapse on the street.

He was much better now, though; quite restored, he told himself firmly. Hand still curled round the tiny leopard's head, he paused under the arch to brush and shake himself into order before facing the critical eye of Tom Byrd, aged eighteen.

A huge stone sundial lay in the center of the square, giving it its name. It was of course not working at the moment, but it did remind Grey of time. He had been engaged to his mother and step-father, General Stanley, for supper, but it was already growing dark; there was no hope of making the long and dangerous carriage ride in time. He'd have to spend the night in Woolwich.

Unpleasant as that prospect was, it carried with it a sense of relief. He'd seen the general since the "unfortunate occurrence," as Hal so tersely termed it, but only briefly. He hadn't been looking forward to a long tête-à-tête.

A movement on the other side of the sundial made him look up. A man was standing there, regarding him with a faintly puzzled, somewhat offended look, as though considering his appearance exceptionable in some way.

Grey might have been offended in turn, were he not taken aback in his turn by the other's appearance, which was most certainly exceptionable.

He wore an unfamiliar uniform, old-fashioned in appearance, of a regiment that Grey did not recognize. The hilt of a dress sword showed beneath his coat—this a full-skirted garment, blue with scarlet facings, and two antique pistols were thrust through his belt. Below were breeches of a grossly unfashionable cut, baggy at the knee and so loose through the leg as to swim about his figure, stocky as it was. His wig, though, was the most remarkable thing, this being unpowdered, long, and curled upon his shoulders in a glossy profusion of dark brown. It was a most unmilitary sight, and Grey frowned at the man.

The soldier appeared no more impressed with Grey; he turned upon his heel without a word and walked toward the opening at the other side of the square. Grey opened his mouth to hail the fellow, then stood with it open. The soldier was gone, the archway empty. Or, no —not empty. A young man was there, looking into the square. Another soldier, an artillery officer by his dress—but certainly not the gentleman in the old-fashioned wig.

"Did you see him?" A voice at Grey's elbow turned him; it was a short, middle-aged man in uniform, faintly familiar. "Did you see him, sir?"

"The strange gentleman in the ancient wig? Yes." He frowned at the man. "Do I know you?" Memory supplied the answer, even as the

soldier knuckled his forehead in salute.

"Aye, sir, though little wonder should you not recognize me. We met—"

"At Crefeld. Yes. You were part of the gun crew serving Tom Pilchard, were you not? You were—yes, you were the rammer." He was sure of it, though the neat soldier before him bore little resemblance to the black-stained, sweat-soaked wretch whose half-toothless savage grin was the last image he recalled of the battle of Crefeld.

"Aye, sir." The rammer appeared less interested in picking up the threads of past acquaintance, though, than in the old-fashioned gentleman who had so abruptly departed. "Did you see him, sir?" he repeated, clearly excited. "It was the ghost!"

"The what?"

"The ghost, sir! 'Twas the Arsenal ghost, I'm sure it was!" The rammer—Grey had never known his name—looked at once terrified and thrilled.

"Whatever are you talking about, Private?" Grey asked sharply. His tone brought the rammer up short, and he stood stiff at attention.

"Why, sir, it's the Arsenal ghost," he said, and despite his pose, his eyes sought the opposite side of the square, where the apparition—if that's what it was—had vanished. "Everybody knows about the Arsenal ghost—but damn few has seen it!"

He sounded almost gloating, though his face was still pale.

"Folk say as he's the ghost of an artillery officer was killed on the proving ground, fifty years or more ago. It's good luck, they say, for an artilleryman to see him—not so good, maybe, was you not of his h'occupation."

"Good luck," Grey repeated, a little bleakly. "Well, and I'm sure we can all use a bit of that. Come to that, Private, how do you come to be here?"

The ghost—if that's what he was—had raised not a hair on Grey's head, but the rammer's presence had set the back of his neck to prickling.

"Oh." The man's look of avid interest faded a little. "I'm summoned, sir. They's a Commission of Inquiry, regarding the h'explosion. Poor old Tom Pilchard," he said, wagging his head mournfully. " 'E were a noble gun."

The rammer glanced at the sundial, gleaming with rain.

"But I come here, sir, for to see was there enough light to tell the

time by the dial, see, sir, not to be late."

A sense of movement on the other side of the square made Grey look up quickly. It was not the ghost, though—if it had been a ghost—but the small, black-coated functionary who had taken him before the commission, wearing a large handkerchief spread over his wig against the rain, and an annoyed expression.

"I believe this will be your summons now," Grey said, nodding toward the functionary. "Good luck!"

The rammer hurriedly straightened his hat, already moving across the square.

"Thank'ee, sir!" he called. "The same to you!"

Grey lingered for a moment after the rammer's departure, looking into the walkway beyond the square. It was growing late in the afternoon, and the light was beginning to darken, but the space beyond was perfectly visible—and perfectly empty.

Grey found himself profoundly uneasy, and seized of a sudden urge to be gone. The artilleryman's ghost—if that's what it was—had not disturbed him in the slightest. What troubled him was the glimpse he had had of the other artilleryman, the young soldier standing in the walkway, watching.

He had told Oswald that he had had no opportunity of studying Philip Lister's face, and that was true enough. He *had*, however, seen it, in the instant before the cannonball struck. And he suffered now from a most unsettling conviction that he had just seen it again.

Drawing his cloak more closely round him, he crossed the square and went to find Tom Byrd, feeling a certain coldness near his heart.



Tom Byrd was waiting patiently for him in Bell Street, sheltering from the rain in a doorway.

"All right, me lord?" he inquired, putting on his broad-brimmed hat.

"Yes, fine."

Byrd narrowed his eyes at Grey, who reflected—not for the first time—that Byrd's round and essentially guileless young face did not in any way prevent his exhibiting the sort of penetrating suspicion more suitable to an officer in charge of a court-martial—or to a nannythan to a valet.

"Fine," Grey repeated, more firmly. "Mere formalities. As I said."

"As you said," Byrd echoed, with a trifle more skepticism than was entirely becoming. "Covering their arses, I expect."

"Certainly that," Grey agreed dryly. "Let us find a little food, Tom. And we must find a bed, as well. Do you know anywhere suitable?"

"To be sure, me lord." Tom squinted in consideration, and after a moment's consultation with the detailed map of London he carried in his head, pointed off toward the east.

"The Lark's Nest; decent house round the corner," he suggested. "Do a nice oyster pie, and the beer's good. Dunno about the beds."

Grey nodded.

"We'll chance the fleas for the sake of the beer."

He gestured to Tom to lead the way, and pulled down his hat against the steady drizzle. He was hungry—ravenous, in fact—having eaten neither breakfast nor dinner, his appetite suppressed by thought of the coming interview.

He had been pushing that interview to the back of his mind, in hopes of distancing the Commission's remarks sufficiently to deal rationally with them later. Now relieved of other distraction, though, there was no escape, and the Commission's questions replayed themselves uncomfortably in his mind as he splashed through darkening puddles after Tom.

He was still angered by Marchmont's insinuations regarding his own possible culpability in the explosion—but not so angered as not to try to examine them honestly.

The baffling taradiddle regarding Edgar he dismissed, seeing no way to make sense of it, save to suppose that Marchmont had intended to goad him and thus perhaps to drive him into unwary admission of fault.

Could the explosion have been in any way his fault? He felt a natural resistance to the suggestion, strong as the involuntary jerk of a knee. But he could not dismiss Marchmont's insinuations—or deal with them, if they could not be dismissed—if he was not clear in his own mind about the matter.

Be the devil's advocate, he told himself, hearing his father's voice in memory. Assume that it was your fault—in what way might it have happened?

Only two possibilities that he could see. The most likely, as Marchmont had implied, was that the gun crew might, in the excitement of the moment, have double-loaded the cannon, not pausing for the first round to be touched off. When the linstock was put to the touchhole, both rounds would have exploded together, thus blowing the cannon apart.

The second possibility was that a faulty round might have been loaded, and properly touched off, but failed to explode. It should by rights have then been cleared from the barrel before a fresh load was inserted—but it was far from uncommon for this step to be overlooked in the heat of battle. If the aim did not require to be adjusted, the process of loading and firing developed an inexorable, mindless rhythm after a time; nothing existed save the next motion in the complex process of serving the gun.

It would be simple; no one would notice that the charge had not gone off, and a fresh load would simply be tamped in on top of the faulty one. Stimulated by the explosion of the second, fresh charge, the faulty one might then explode, as well. He'd seen that happen once, himself, though in that instance, the cannon had merely been damaged, not destroyed.

Neither instance was rare, he knew. It was therefore the responsibility of the officer commanding the gun to see that every member of the crew performed each step of his duty, to discover such errors in process and correct them before they became irrevocable. Had he done that?

For the hundredth time since he heard of the Commission of Inquiry, he reviewed his memories of the battle of Crefeld, looking for any indication of an omission, any half-voiced protest by some member of the gun crew ... but they had been completely demoralized by the sudden death of their lieutenant, in no frame of mind to concentrate. They might so easily have made an error.

But the Commission had called the rammer. Had they already interviewed the other surviving members of the gun crew, he wondered suddenly? If so ... but if some member of the gun crew had testified to double-loading, Grey would have been facing more than insinuations.

"Here we are, me lord!" Tom called over his shoulder, turning in to a sturdy, half-timbered house.

They had arrived at the Lark's Nest, and the smell of food and beer drew him momentarily from his broodings. Even oyster pie, sausage rolls, and good beer, though, could not keep recollection at bay. Once summoned, Crefeld remained with him, the smell of black powder, slaughtered pigs, and rain-soaked fields overpowering the scents of tobacco smoke and fresh-baked bread.

He had so many impressions of the day, the battle, many of them sharp as crystal—but able, like broken bits of crystal shaken in a dish, to fall suddenly into new and baffling patterns.

What, exactly, had he done? He recalled some things clearly—seizing the sword from Lister's fallen body, beating the crew back to the gun—but later? He could not be sure.

Neither could he be sure of the Commission's motives. What in bloody *hell* had Marchmont meant by dragging Edgar in? Twelvetrees's hostility was more understandable; there was bad blood between the Royal Artillery Regiment and his brother Hal, a feud of long standing, that had not been improved by last month's—Christ, was it only a month past? It seemed years—revelations.

And Oswald ... he had seemed sympathetic by contrast with Marchmont and Twelvetrees, but Grey knew better than to trust such spurious sympathy. Oswald was an elected politician, hence by definition untrustworthy. At least until Grey knew more about who owned him.

"You are going to eat that, me lord, aren't you?" He looked up to find Tom Byrd focusing a stern look upon the neglected sausage roll in his hand.

And beyond Tom Byrd, at a table in the corner, sat a uniformed artilleryman, talking with two friends over pint-pots of the excellent beer. The man looked familiar, though he knew he did not know him. Another member of Tom Pilchard's crew?

"I haven't an appetite," he said abruptly, laying down the roll. "I believe I'll chance the fleas."



The next morning, he and Tom returned to London by the post coach, arriving at his rooms—officers' quarters at the regimental barracks—by mid-afternoon. He sent a note of apology to his mother, looked at a pile of unopened mail, decided that it could continue in that state indefinitely, picked two or three random lice from his body, bathed, shaved, and then, dressed in a fresh suit of clothes, set out on foot for the Beefsteak Club in Curzon Street.

He hadn't set foot in the Beefsteak in months. In part, it was a simple disinclination for society; he had needed time apart to heal, before facing the companionship and curiosity—no matter how kindly meant—of his fellows.

The greater reason, though, was one which he scarcely admitted to himself. He had wished the Beefsteak to remain what it had always been for him—a place of peace and refuge. He could withstand the buffeting of circumstance, comforted by the thought that there was somewhere to which he could retire, if the pressures of the world became too much to bear.

If he did not go to the Beefsteak, his sense of it would be unchanged; his refuge was safe. But to go was to risk discovering that it was not, and he stepped across the threshold with a racing heart.

For an instant, he suffered the delusion that the dark red medallions of the Turkey runner in the entrance hall were blotches of blood, that some unsuspected catastrophe had befallen the place, and that he would enter the library to find bodies strewn in careless butchery.

He closed his eyes, and put out a hand to the doorjamb to steady himself. Breathed deep, and smelt the incense of tobacco and brandy, aged leather and the musk of men, spiced with the scents of fresh linen, lavender, and bergamot.

"My lord?" It was the chief steward's voice. He opened his eyes to find the man squinting at him in consternation, the library behind him its usual soft brown self, glowing like paradise in the late-afternoon light that filtered through the lace curtains of the tall windows and suffused the rising wisps of pipe smoke from the smoking room.

"Will you take a glass of brandywine, my lord?" the steward asked, stepping back to open the way to his favorite chair, a wing-backed object upholstered in a dark-green damask, sagging in the seat and much worn about the arms.

"If you please, Mr. Bodley," he said, and peace filled his soul.



He returned to the Beefsteak again the next day, and spent a pleasant hour sipping good brandy in the Hermits' Corner—a trio of chairs set apart, facing the windows, backs turned to the room, for the use of those who had no appetite for company. One of the other chairs was

occupied by a man he knew slightly, named Wilbraham; they nodded to each other as Grey sat down, and then studiously ignored each other's presence.

Behind them came the soothing murmur of masculine conversation, punctuated by laughter and suffused with the odors of linen, sweat, cologne, and brandy, spiced with a hint of tobacco from the smoking room down the hall. Fiber by fiber, Grey felt his clenched muscles relax.

As he had known it must, though, his tranquillity came to an abrupt end with the descent of a large, meaty hand on his shoulder. He turned to look into Harry Quarry's grinning face, smiled despite himself, and rose, leaving Wilbraham in solitary contemplation of Curzon Street.

"You look like death warmed over," Quarry said without preamble, after a briefly searching look at him. This annoyed Grey, as Tom Byrd had taken considerable pains with his appearance, and he had thought he looked quite well, inspecting himself in the glass before setting out.

"You're looking well, too, Harry," he replied equably, finding no quick riposte. In fact, he did. War agreed with Quarry, lending a fine edge to a body and a character otherwise somewhat inclined to sloth, gluttony, cigars, and other appetites of the flesh.

"Melton said you'd had a bad time since Germany." Quarry ushered him to the dining room and into a chair with an annoying solicitude, all but tucking a napkin under Grey's chin.

"Did he," Grey replied shortly. How much had Hal told Quarry—and how much had he heard on his own? Rumor spread faster in the army than it did among the London salons.

Luckily, Quarry seemed disinclined to inquire after the particulars—which probably meant he'd already heard them, Grey concluded grimly.

Quarry looked him over and shook his head. "Too thin by half! Have to feed you up, I suppose." This assessment was followed by Quarry's ordering—without consulting him—thick soup, game pie, fried trout with grapes, lamb with a quince preserve and roast potatoes, and a broccoli sallet with radishes and vinegar, the whole to be followed by a jelly trifle.

"I can't eat a quarter of that, Harry," Grey protested. "I'll burst."

Quarry ignored this, waving a hand to urge the waiter to ladle more soup into Grey's bowl.

"You need sustenance," he said, "from what I hear."

Grey looked askance at him over his half-raised spoon.

"What you hear? What do you hear, may I ask?"

Quarry's craggily handsome face adopted the look that he normally wore when intending to be discreet, the fine white scar across his cheek pulling down the eye on that side in a knowing leer.

"Heard they knocked you about a bit at the Arsenal day before yesterday."

Grey put down the spoon and stared at him.

"Who told you that?"

"Chap named Simpson."

Grey racked his brain for anyone named Simpson whom he had met in the course of his visit to the Arsenal, but drew a complete blank.

"Who the hell is Simpson?" To show his general unconcern over the matter, he took an unwary gulp of soup, and burnt his tongue.

"Don't recall his actual title—under-under-sub-secretary to the assistant something-or-other, I suppose. He said he picked you up off the floor—physically. Didn't know royal commissions resorted to cudgeling their witnesses." Harry raised an interrogative brow.

"Oh, him." Grey touched his singed tongue gingerly to the roof of his mouth. "He did not pick me up; I rose quite without assistance, having caught my foot in the carpeting. Mr. Simpson happened merely to be present."

Quarry looked at him thoughtfully, nodded, and inhaled a vast quantity of soup.

"Might easily happen to anyone," he said mildly. "Ratty old thing, that carpet, full of holes. Know it well."

Recognizing this for the cue it was, Grey sighed and picked up his spoon again.

"You know it well. Right, Harry. Why are you haunting the Arsenal, and what is it you want to know?"

"Haunting," Quarry repeated thoughtfully, signaling the waiter to remove his soup plate. "Interesting choice of words, that. Our Mr. Simpson said he rather thought you'd met the ghost."

That rattled him more than he wished to show. He waved away the soup, affecting indifference.

"So the Arsenal has its own ghost, has it? Would that be an artilleryman, wearing an ancient uniform?"

"Oh, you *did* see him, then." Harry's eyes sharpened with interest. "The artilleryman, was it? Some see him as a Roman centurion—there's a Roman cemetery under the Arsenal, did you know?"

"No. How do you know whether it's a ghost with a taste for fancy dress, or two ghosts—or whether it's a ghost at all?"

"Never seen him myself. I'm not the sort who sees phantoms," Quarry said, with a sort of smugness that Grey found irritating.

"And I am, I suppose?" Not waiting for an answer, he picked up a bread roll. "Did you set this Simpson to watch me, Harry?"

"Someone should be watching you," Quarry said. "Have you any notion what kind of trouble you're in?"

"No, but I suppose you're going to tell me. Is it mutiny to walk out on the questions of a royal commission? Am I to be shot at dawn tomorrow?"

He was not sure whether to be grateful for Harry's concern, or annoyed at his solicitude. The one thing he did know was that he required someone to discuss the matter with, though, and so he kept his tone light.

"Too simple." Quarry's face twitched, and he waved the steward with the wine bottle over to refill their glasses. "Twelvetrees wants Melton's balls, but failing that, he'll have yours. His assumption being, I suppose, that it would discredit Melton to have his younger brother accused of negligence and forced—at the least—to resign his commission amidst a sea of talk."

"They can accuse all they like," Grey said hotly. "They can't prove a damn thing." Or he hoped they couldn't. What in God's name might the rammer have told them? Or the other man from Tom Pilchard's crew?

Quarry raised a thick brow.

"I doubt they'd have to," he said bluntly, "if they can raise enough doubt about your actions, and get enough talk started. Surely you know that."

Grey felt blood starting to throb in his temples, and concentrated on keeping his hands steady as he buttered a bite of bread.

"What I know," he said levelly, "is that they cannot force me to resign my commission, let alone prosecute me for negligence or malfeasance, without evidence. And I am assuming that they have none, because if they did, the ubiquitous Mr. Simpson would have told you of it." He raised a brow at Quarry. "Am I right?"

Quarry's mouth twitched.

"It isn't only Twelvetrees, mind," he said, lifting a monitory finger. "I suppose you didn't know that the gentleman presently sitting in the Tower, accused of treason as the result of your recent industry, is

Marchmont's cousin?"

Grey choked on the bite of roll he had taken.

"I'll take that as a 'no,' shall I?" Quarry sat back, allowing the waiter to serve his lamb, while Mr. Bodley imperturbably struck Grey between the shoulder blades, dislodging the roll, before continuing to pour the wine.

"Is this entire commission engineered for the purpose of discrediting me, then?" Grey asked, as soon as he had got his breath back.

"'Strewth, no. It wasn't only your bloody gun that's blown up. Eight more of 'em, within the last ten months."

Grey's jaw dropped with astonishment, and he belatedly recalled the shattered remnants laid out for autopsy behind the proving grounds. Certainly more broken guns lay on those tables than the mortal remains of Tom Pilchard.

"This, naturally, is not something the Ordnance Office wants talked about. Might put the wind up the Germans—to say nothing of the Dutch—who are paying through the nose for cannon from the Royal Foundry, under the impression that these are the best armament available anywhere.

"Not that this is entirely a bad thing," he added, shoveling a judicious quantity of quince preserve over his lamb. "It's what's keeping them from trying harder than they are to have you drawn and quartered. You might have blown up one cannon, but you can't have done nine."

"I did not blow it up!"

Harry blinked, surprised, and Grey felt his cheeks flush. He looked down into his plate and saw that the fork in his hand was shaking, ever so slightly. He laid it carefully down, and taking his wineglass in both hands, drank deep.

"I know that," Quarry said, quietly.

Grey nodded, not trusting himself to speak. But do I know it? he thought.

Quarry coughed, delicately separating a forkful of succulent meat from its gristle.

"The word 'sabotage' is being breathed—though the Ordnance Office is doing its level best to stifle any such breathing. Yet another reason to make a scapegoat of you, you see: make enough noise about Tom Pilchard, and perhaps the grubs of Fleet Street will be so busy baying at your heels, they won't hear about the other ruptured guns."

"Sabotage," Grey repeated blankly. "How can you—Oh, Jesus. It's bloody Edgar, isn't it? They honestly suspect Edgar DeVane of—of—Christ, what on earth do they think he's done?"

"It hasn't got so far as thinking," Harry assured him drily. "And I've no idea whether they actually suspect your half brother of anything personally. Might only have been dragging him in in order to rattle you and make you do something injudicious—like walk out of the inquiry."

He chewed, closing his eyes in momentary bliss.

"By God, that's good. Anyway," he went on, swallowing and opening his eyes. "I've had nothing to do with artillery, myself. But I suppose it *would* be possible to blow up a cannon with a bomb of some sort, disguised as a canister of ordinary shot?"

"I suppose so." Grey picked up his fork, then laid it down again and clenched his hands together in his lap.

"Well. Have you any useful suggestions to make, Harry?"

"I think you should eat your trout while it's still hot." Quarry prodded his own fish approvingly in illustration. "Beyond that ..." He eyed Grey, chewing.

"There is a certain opinion in the regiment, to the effect that perhaps you should be seconded to the Sixty-fifth, or possibly the Seventy-eighth. Temporarily, of course; let things blow over and quiet down."

The Sixty-fifth was presently stationed in the West Indies, Grey knew; the Seventy-eighth was a Highland regiment somewhere in the American colonies—the Northwest Territory, perhaps, or some other outlandish place.

"Thus allowing Twelvetrees and Marchmont to claim that I've fled to avoid prosecution, thus lending credence to their preposterous insinuations. I think not."

Harry nodded, matter-of-fact.

"Of course. Which leaves us with my original suggestion."

Grey raised an eyebrow at him.

"Eat your trout," Quarry said. "And the devil with your hands. Mine would shake, too, in your position."



Hal was, of course, with the part of the regiment presently in winter quarters in Prussia. Harry had wanted to send word to him, but Grey declined.

"There is little Hal can do, and his presence would merely inflame feelings further," he pointed out. "Let me see what I can do alone; time enough to advise him if anything drastic should happen."

"And what *do* you propose to do?" Quarry asked, giving him a narrow look.

"Go down to Sussex and see Edgar DeVane," Grey replied. "He ought at least to know that his name is being put forward as a suspected saboteur. And if there should be anything whatever to the matter ..."

"Well, that will at least get you out of Town and out of sight for a bit," Quarry agreed dubiously. "Can't hurt. And you could be back within two or three days, should anything—you will pardon my choice of words, I trust—blow up."



Grey's departure for Sussex was delayed, however, by receipt of a note in the morning post.

"What is it, me lord?" Tom, attracted by Grey's muttered blasphemies, stuck his head out of the pantry, where he had been cleaning boots.

"A Mr. Lister, from Sussex, is in Town. He wishes to call upon me, should I find that convenient."

Tom shrugged. "You might have found it convenient to be already gone, me lord," he suggested.

"I would, but I can't. He's the father of Lieutenant Lister, the officer who was killed at Crefeld. He's heard that I have his son's sword, and while he's much too polite to say he wants it back, that is his obvious desire."

Grey reached for ink and paper with a sigh.

"I'll tell him to come this afternoon. We'll leave tomorrow."



Mr. Lister had a slight stammer, made worse by emotion, and a small, pale face, overwhelmed by a very new and full-bottomed wig, from whose depths he peeped out like a wary field mouse.

"Lord John G-Grey? I intrude intolerably, sir, but I—Colonel Quarry said ... that is, I do hope I am not ..."

"Not in the slightest," Grey said firmly. "And it is I who must beg pardon of you, sir. You should not have put yourself to the trouble of coming; I should have been most pleased to wait upon you." Lord John bowed him to a chair, flicking a glance at Tom, who promptly vanished in search of refreshment.

"Oh, no, n-not at all, my lord. I—it is most gracious in you to receive me so s-suddenly. I know I am ..." He waved a small, neat hand in a gesture that encompassed social doubt, self-effacement, and abject apology—and conveyed such a sense of helplessness that Grey felt himself obliged to take Mr. Lister's arm and lead him physically to a seat.

"I must apologize, sir," he said, having seen his guest settled. "I ought to have made an effort to inquire for Lieutenant Lister's family long before this."

A faint approximation of a smile touched Mr. Lister's face.

"That is kind in you to say, sir. But there is no reason, really, why you should. Philip"—his lips twitched at speaking his dead son's name—"Philip was not of your regiment, nor in any way under your command."

"He was a fellow officer," Grey assured him. "And thus has claim to both my duty and respect—as does his family." Having been drenched to the skin in Philip Lister's blood seemed an even more immediate claim upon his interest, but he thought he would not mention the fact.

"Oh." Mr. Lister drew a deep breath, and seemed a little easier. "I—Thank you."

"Will you take something, sir? A little wine, perhaps?" Tom had appeared, manfully lugging an enormous tray equipped with a rattling array of bottles, decanters, glasses, and an immense seed cake. Where had he got that? Grey wondered.

"Oh! No, I thank you, my lord. I d-do not take spirits. We are Methodist, you understand."

"Of course," Grey said. "We'll have tea, Tom, if you please."

Tom gave Mr. Lister a disapproving look, but decanted the cake onto the table, hoisted the tray, and rattled off into the recesses of the apartment. There was an awkward pause, which a little port or Madeira would have covered admirably. Not for the first time, Grey wondered at a religion which rejected so many of the things that made life tolerable. Perhaps it sprang from an intent to make heaven seem that much more desirable by contrast to a life from which pleasure had been largely removed.

But he must admit that his own attitudes toward Methodists perhaps lacked justice, having been badly colored by—He choked off that line of thought before it could reach its natural conclusion, and picking up the knife Tom had brought, waved it inquiringly in the direction of the seed cake.

Mr. Lister accepted the offer with alacrity, but obviously more in order to have something to do than from appetite, for he merely poked at his allotted portion, breaking off small bits and mashing them randomly with his fork.

Grey did his best to conduct a conversation, making courteous inquiries regarding Mr. Lister's wife and other family, but it was hard going, with the shade of Philip Lister perched like a vulture over the seed cake on the table between them.

At last, Grey put down his cup and glanced at Tom, hovering discreetly near the door.

"Tom, do you have Lieutenant Lister's sword convenient?"

"Oh, yes, me lord," Tom assured him, with an air of relief. Mr. Lister was getting on his nerves, too. "Cleaned and polished, kept quite proper!"

It was. Grey doubted that the sword had ever achieved such a blinding state of propriety while in the care of its original owner.

Grey felt an unexpected pang as he took the sheathed sword from Tom and presented it to Mr. Lister. He had no thought of keeping it, of course, and in fact had barely thought of it in the days since his return to England. Seeing it, though, and holding it, brought back in a sudden rush the events surrounding the battle at Crefeld.

The fog of misery and terror he had felt on that day enveloped him again, miasmalike—and then, cutting through all that, the weight of the sword in his hand, the same as the feeling in him when he had seized it from Lister's body. In that moment, he had thrown all emotion and any sense of self-preservation to the wind, and flung himself howling on the deserting gun crew, shouting and beating them with the flat of the sword, forcing them back to their duty by the power of his will.

He had not realized it until much later, but that moment of abnegation had had the paradoxical effect of making him whole, as though the heat of battle had melted all the shattered bits of mind and heart and forged him anew—into something hard and adamant, incapable of being hurt.

Then, of course, Tom Pilchard had blown up.

His hand had grown damp on the leather of the scabbard, and it took an actual effort of will to relinquish it.

Mr. Lister looked at the sword for some time, holding it upon the palms of his hands as though it might be some holy relic. Finally, very gently, he set it upon his knees, and coughed.

"I th-thank you, Lord John," he said. His face worked for a moment, formulating words with such effort as to suggest that each one must be individually molded of clay.

"I—that is, my wife. His m-mother. I d-do not wish to ... cause offense. Certainly. Or—or discomfort. B-but it would be perhaps some s-solace, were she to know what ... what ..." He stopped abruptly, eyes closed. He sat thus for some moments, absolutely still, seeming not even to breathe, and Grey exchanged an uneasy look with Tom, not sure whether his guest was merely overcome with emotion, or suffering a fit of some kind.

At last, Mr. Lister drew breath, though he did not open his eyes.

"Did he speak?" he asked hoarsely. "Did you talk ... talk to him? His last—his last w-words ..." Tears had begun to course down Mr. Lister's pale face.

Methodist be damned, Grey thought. Prayer doubtless had its place, but when you were right up against it, there was no substitute for alcohol.

"Brandy, please, Tom," he said, but it was there already, Tom nearly spilling the glass in his haste.

"Mr. Lister. Please, sir." He leaned forward, tried to take Lister's hands in his, but they were clenched into fists.

He remembered the lieutenant's last words, vividly. Likewise, Philip Lister's expression of openmouthed astonishment as the cannonball had struck the ground, hit a stone, and soared up into the air—an instant later decapitating the lieutenant and rendering his last words ironically prophetic.

"Fuck me!" the lieutenant had said, in wonderment.

Mr. Lister was so much overcome with emotion that he made little protest at the brandy, and while he coughed and spluttered, Grey managed to pour sufficient into him as to induce a semblance of calm at last.

He had had it in mind, seeing his guest's distress, to compose some suitably noble speech in lieu of Philip Lister's actual exit line, but found that he could not bring himself to do this.

"I saw your son for the first time only moments before his death," he said, as gently as he could. "There was no time for talk. But I can assure you, sir, that he died instantly—and he died bravely, as a soldier of the king. You—and your wife, of course—may be justly proud of him."

"May we?" The brandy had calmed Mr. Lister, and had the salutary effect of relieving his stammer, but had also brought a hectic flush to his pale cheeks.

"I thank you for your words, sir. And seeing that you share the profession of arms, I suppose you mean them."

"I do," Grey said, somewhat surprised.

Lister mopped at his face with the handkerchief Tom had discreetly provided, and looked directly at Grey for the first time.

"You will think me ungrateful, my lord, and I assure you I am not. But I must tell you that we—my wife and I—were completely opposed to Philip's choice of career. We—fell out over the matter, I regret to say. In f-fact ..." He swallowed heavily. "We had not spoken to Philip since he took up his commission."

And now he was dead, as a direct result of having done so. Grey took a deep breath and nodded.

"I see, sir. You have my sympathy. A bit more brandy, perhaps? Purely for medicinal purposes."

Mr. Lister looked at the bottle with a certain longing, but shook his head.

"No, my lord. I ... no."

He fell silent, looking down at the sword, which he now clutched tightly, one hand wrapped around the scabbard.

"May I ask a great favor of you, my lord?" he said abruptly.

"Certainly," Grey replied, willing to do almost anything, firstly to relieve Lister's distress, secondly to get him out of Grey's sitting room.

"I said that we were opposed to Philip's pursuing a career with the army. He bought his commission with a small inheritance, and left almost immediately for London." The hectic flush had faded a little; now it came back, washing up Mr. Lister's throat in a tide of shame. "He—he t-took ..." The words dried in his throat, and he looked

down, fumbling with the ring of the scabbard.

Took what? Grey wondered. The family silver? Was he to be asked to comb pawnshops for bartered heirlooms? With a sense of resignation, he poured more tea, picked up the brandy bottle and added a healthy dollop, then firmly handed the cup to Mr. Lister.

"Took what?" he asked bluntly.

Mr. Lister took the tea with trembling hands and, with an obvious effort, went on, looking down into its aromatic depths.

"He had formed an ... attachment. To the daughter of our minister—a most suitable young woman; my wife and daughters were terribly fond of her."

The minister had been, if not fond of Philip Lister, at least amenable to the match—until Philip had declared his intention of becoming a soldier.

The upshot of this had been that the minister had broken off the attachment—evidently it had not reached the stage of betrothal—and forbade Philip the house. Whereupon the new lieutenant, inflamed, had come round by night with a ladder, and in the best romantic tradition, induced his love to elope with him.

The little he had heard from Quarry of Philip Lister had already convinced Grey that perhaps the son was not so religious in outlook as were his parents; thus this revelation was not quite the shock to him that it plainly had been to his family.

"The scandal," Mr. Lister whispered, and, gulping tea, shuddered convulsively. "The disgrace of it nearly killed m-my wife. And the Reverend Mr. Thackeray, of course ... The things he preached ..."

Familiar with the ways of scandal, Grey had no difficulty in envisioning the aftermath of Lieutenant Lister's elopement. The religious aspects of the matter had—as they usually did, he reflected —merely magnified the damage.

The Lister family had been summarily dismissed from the congregation, even though they had already publicly disowned Philip. Their dismissal had in turn caused dissent and schism in the congregation—which had, naturally, spread throughout the village of which Mr. Lister was squire, resulting in general bad feeling, fisticuffs in the pub, the burning of someone's hayrick, and specific and personal denunciation of the Listers and their supporters from the pulpit.

"It is not that I consider the practice of arms immoral in itself, you understand," Mr. Lister said, wiping his nose—which had gone bright

red with emotion and brandy—with a napkin. "Only that we had hoped for better things for Philip. He was our only son."

Grey was conscious of Tom Byrd on the opposite side of the room, prickling like a hedgehog, but was careful not to catch his eye.

"I quite understand, sir," he said, meaning only to be soothing.

"Do you, my lord?" Lister gave him a look of puzzled anguish. He seemed intent that Grey *should* understand. His brow drew down and he turned the sword over in his hand, seeming to search for some means of making himself clearer.

"It is such—such a *brutal* occupation, is it not?" he burst out at last. Grey stared at him, thinking, *Yes. And so?*

Before he could formulate something polite in reply, Tom Byrd, bending over the table to retrieve the seed cake, leapt in.

"I daresay," he said hotly. "And if it wasn't, you'd be saying what you just said in bleedin' French, wouldn't you?"

Lister regarded him, openmouthed. Grey coughed and motioned Tom hastily out of the room. The young valet went, with a last glower of disapproval at their guest.

"I must apologize for my valet, sir," Grey said, feeling a terrible urge to laugh. "He is ..." A faint rattle from the cup and saucer he held made him realize that his hands had begun to shake, and he set them carefully down, grasping his knees with both hands.

"He is honest," Lister said bleakly.

Outspoken honesty was not a virtue generally prized in a valet, but it was a virtue for all that—and Grey prized it. He nodded, and cleared his throat.

"A, um, favor, I believe you said?"

"Yes, my lord." The recounting of his woes—and the recollection of the Reverend Mr. Thackeray's most iniquitous sermon—had revived Mr. Lister more than brandy. He sat bolt upright, cup clutched to his bosom, his dead son's sword across his knees, and fixed Grey with a burning gaze.

"I wish your help, my lord, in finding the girl. Anne Thackeray. I have some reason to suppose she was with child—and if so, I want the babe."



"I am completely insane."

"You've a very kind heart, me lord," Tom Byrd said reprovingly. "Not the same thing at all."

"Oh, I am reasonably sure that it is—at least in this instance. Kind of you to give me the benefit of the doubt, though, Tom."

"Of course, me lord. Lift your chin a bit, if you please." Tom breathed heavily through his nose, frowning in concentration as he drew the razor delicately up the side of Grey's neck.

"Not as I know why you said you'd do it, mind," Byrd remarked.

Grey shrugged one shoulder, careful not to move his head. He wasn't sure why he'd said he'd do it, either. In part, he supposed, because he felt some guilt over not having made an effort to return Lister's sword to his father sooner. In part because the Listers' village was no more than an hour's ride from his brother Edgar's place in Sussex—and he anticipated that having some excuse to escape from Maude might be useful.

And, if he were honest, because the prospect of dealing with other people's trouble was a welcome distraction from his own. Of course, he reflected, none of these considerations proved that he was *not* insane.

Tom Byrd's considerations were of another sort, though.

"Brutal occupation, is it?" he muttered. Lister's words of the day before had clearly rankled. "I'll brutalize him and he don't mind his manners summat better. To say such a thing to you, and half a minute later ask you a bleedin' great favor!"

"Well, the man was upset. I daresay he didn't think—"

"Oh, he thought, all right! Me lord," Tom added as an afterthought. "Reckon he's done nothing *but* think since his son was killed," he added, in less vehement tones.

He laid down the razor and subjected Grey's physiognomy to his usual searching inspection, hazel eyes narrowed in concentration. Satisfied that no stray whisker had escaped him, he took up the hairbrush and went round to complete the chore of making his employer fit for public scrutiny.

He snorted briefly, pausing to work out a tangle with his fingers. Grey's hair was like his mother's—fair, thick and slightly wavy, prone to disorder unless tightly constrained, which it always would be, if Tom Byrd was given his way. Actually, Tom would be best pleased if Grey would consent to have his head polled and wear a good wig like a decent gentleman, but some things were past hoping for.

"You've not been sleeping proper," Byrd said accusingly. "I can tell. You've been a-wallowing on your pillow; your hair's a right rat's nest!"

"I do apologize, Tom," Grey said politely. "Perhaps I should sleep upright in a chair, in order to make your work easier?"

"Hmp," Byrd said. And added, after a few moment's strenuous brushing, "Ah, well. P'r'aps the country air will help."



Tom Byrd, always suspicious of the countryside, was not reassured by his first sight of Mudling Parva.

"Rats," he said darkly, peering at the charmingly thatched rooves of the cottages they passed. "I'll wager there's rats up in them thatches, to say nothing of bugs and such nastiness. My old granny come from a village like this. She told stories, how the rats would come down from the thatch at night and eat the faces off babies. Right in their cradles!" He looked accusingly at Lord John.

"There are rats in London," Lord John pointed out. "Probably ten times more of them than in the countryside. And neither you nor I, Tom, are babes."

Tom hunched his shoulders, not convinced.

"Well, but. In the city, you can see things coming, like. Here ..." He glanced round, his disparaging look taking in not only the muddy lane of the village and the occasional gaping villager, but also the tangled hedgerows, the darkly barren fallow fields, and the shadowed groves of leafless trees, huddled near the distant stream. "Things might sneak up on you here, me lord. Easy."

Part II



Family Matters

Blackthorn Hall, Sussex

Grey knew that his mother's first husband, Captain DeVane, had been a most impressive man to look at—tall, handsome, dark, and dashing, with an aristocratically prominent nose and hooded gray eyes that gave him the aspect of a poet; Grey had seen several portraits.

Edgar, like his elder brother, Paul, exhibited these same characteristics, to a degree that caused young women to stare at him in the village, their mouths half open, despite the fact that he was well into his forties.

Filial respect caused Grey to hesitate in passing *ex post facto* opinions on his mother's judgment, but after half an hour in the company of either Paul or Edgar, he could not escape a lurking suspicion that a just Providence, seeing the DeVanes so well endowed with physical beauty, had determined that there was no reason to spoil the work by adding intelligence to the mix.

"What?" Edgar frowned at him in incomprehension. "Somebody thinks I might have blown up a *cannon*? Bloody cheek!"

Of course, Grey reflected with an inner sigh, his mother *had* been only fifteen when she married DeVane.

"Not you, personally, no," he assured Edgar. "The question—"

"Wasn't even there, was I?" Edgar's high cheekbones flushed with indignation.

"I'm sure I should have noticed if you had been," Grey assured him gravely. "The question—"

"Who's this Marchmont fellow, anyway? Piddling Irish title, not more than two generations out of the muck, what does he think he's about, insulting *me*?" The DeVanes boasted nothing more than the odd knighthood, but could—and Maude often tiresomely did—trace their lineage back to well before the Conquest.

"I'm sure no insult was--" Well, actually, he was convinced of

exactly the opposite; Marchmont's purpose had been specific and blatant insult—and he did wonder why. Was it only to rattle Grey himself—or had he been *meant* to convey Marchmont's remarks to Edgar, all along? Well, that was a question to be turned over later.

For the moment, he dropped any further attempts at soothing his half brother and asked bluntly, "Who oversees your powder mill, Edgar?"

Edgar looked at him blankly for an instant, but then the mist of anger in the hooded eyes lifted. Cleverness and intuition were not his strongest suits, but he could be depended on for straightforward facts.

"William Hoskins. Bill, he goes by. Decent man, got him from Waltham, a year ago. You think he's something to do with this?"

"As I've never heard of the man 'til this moment, I've no idea, but I should like very much to speak with him, if you have no objection."

"Not the slightest." They were standing in the orchard behind the manor house; Grey had waited for an opportunity to speak to Edgar in privacy after breakfast.

"Come now," said Edgar, turning with an air of decision. "We'll cut across the fields; it's quicker than fetching horses and going round by the road."

It was rough going across the autumn fields, some already turned under by the plow, some still thick with stubble and the sharp, ragged ends of cornstalks, but Grey didn't mind. The day was cold and misty, the sky gray and very low, so the air seemed still around them, wrapping them in silence, unbroken save for the occasional *whir* of a pheasant rising, or the distant calling of crows among the furrows.

It was a good two miles from the house to the powder mill, located on a bend of the river, and the brothers kept to their own thoughts for some time. At a stile, though, Grey caught his foot coming down and twisted awkwardly to save himself falling. The movement sent a sharp hot wire lancing through his chest, and he froze, trying not to breathe. He had made an involuntary noise, though, and Edgar turned, startled.

Grey lifted a hand, indicating that he would be all right—he hoped he would—but couldn't speak.

Edgar's brow creased with concern, and he put out a hand, but Grey waved him off. It had happened several times before, and generally the pain passed within a few moments; Dr. Longstreet's irritation of the nerves, quite harmless. There was always the possibility, though, that it might indicate a shift of the sliver of iron embedded in his

chest, in which case he might be dead within the next few seconds.

He held his breath until he felt his ears ring and his vision gray, then essayed the slightest breath, found it possible, and slowly relaxed, the nightmare feeling of suffocation vanishing as his lungs expanded without further incident.

"Are you quite all right, John?" Edgar was surveying him with an expression of worried concern that moved him.

"Yes, fine." He straightened himself, and gave Edgar a quick grimace of reassurance. "Nothing. Just ... taken queer for a moment."

Edgar gave him a sharp look that reminded him for an unsettling instant of their mother.

"Taken queer," he repeated, eyes passing up and down Grey's body as though inspecting him for damage, like a horse that had come up suddenly lame. "Melton's wife wrote to Maude that you'd been injured in Germany; she didn't say it was serious."

"It isn't." Grey spoke lightly, feeling pleasantly giddy at the realization that he wasn't going to die just this minute.

Edgar eyed him for a moment longer, but then nodded, patted him awkwardly and surprisingly on the arm, and turned toward the river.

"Never could understand why you went to the army," Edgar said, shaking his head in disapproval. "Hal ... well, of course. But surely there was no need for *you* to take up soldiering."

"What else should I do?"

Grey wasn't offended. He felt suffused with a great lightness of being. The stubbled fields and clouded sky embraced him, immeasurably beautiful. Even Edgar seemed tolerable.

Oddly enough, Edgar seemed to be considering his question.

"You've money of your own," he said, after a moment's thought. "You could go into politics. Buy a pocket borough, stand for election."

Just in time, Grey recalled his mother mentioning that Edgar himself had stood for Parliament in the last by-election, and refrained from saying that personally, he would prefer to be shot outright than to have anything to do with politics.

"It's a thought," he said agreeably, and they spoke no more, until the powder mill came in sight.

It was a brick building, a converted grain mill, and outwardly tranquil, its big waterwheel turning slowly.

"That's for the coarse grinding," Edgar said, nodding at the wheel. "We use a horse-drawn edge runner for the finer bits; more control."

"Oh, to be sure," Grey replied, having no idea what an edge runner

might be. "A very aromatic process, I collect?"

A gust of wind had brought them an eye-watering wave of feculent stink, and Edgar coughed, pulling a handkerchief from his coat and putting it over his nose in a practiced manner.

"Oh, that. That's just the jakesmen."

"The what?" Grey hastily applied his own handkerchief in imitation.

"Saltpeter," Edgar explained, taking obvious satisfaction in knowing something that his clever-arse younger brother did not. "One requires brimstone—sulfur, you know—charcoal, and saltpeter for gunpowder, of course—"

"I did know that, yes."

"—We can produce the charcoal here, of course, and sulfur is reasonably cheap; well, saltpeter is not so expensive, either, but most of it is imported from India these days—used to get it from France, but now—Well, so, the more of it we can obtain locally—"

"You're digging it out of your tenants' manure piles?" Grey felt a strong inclination to laugh.

"And the privies. It forms in large nuggets, down at the bottom," Edgar replied seriously, then smiled. "You know there's a law, written in Good Queen Bess's time, but still on the books, that allows agents of the Crown to come round and dig out the jakes of any citizen, in time of war? A local lawyer found it for me; most useful."

"I should think your tenants might find having their privies excavated to be a positive benefit," Grey observed, laughing openly.

"Well, that part's all right," Edgar admitted, looking modestly pleased with all this evidence of his business acumen. "They're less delighted at our messing about their manure piles, but they do put up with it—and it lowers the cost amazingly."

He waved briefly as they passed within sight of the jakesmen, two muffled figures unhitching a morose-looking horse from a wagon piled high with irregular chunks of reddish-brown, but kept his handkerchief pressed firmly to his nose until they had moved upwind.

"Anyway, it all goes there"—he pointed at a small brick shed—"to be melted and cleaned. Then there, to the mixing shed"—another brick building, somewhat larger—"and then to one of the milling sheds, for the grinding and corning. Oh, but here's Hoskins; I'll leave you to him. Hoskins!"

Bill Hoskins proved to be a ruddy, healthy-looking man of thirty or so—young for an overseer, Grey thought. He bowed most respectfully when introduced, but had no hesitation in meeting Grey's eyes. Hoskins's own were a striking blue-gray, the irises rimmed with black; Grey noticed, then felt an odd clench in the pit of his stomach at the realization that he *had* noticed.

In the course of the next hour, he learned a great many things, among them what an edge runner was—this being a great slab of stone that could be drawn by horses over a flat trough of gunpowder —what raw sulfur smelled like—rotten eggs, as digested by Satan; "the devil's farts," as Hoskins put it, with a smile—how gunpowder was shipped—by barge down the river—and that Bill Hoskins was a noticeably well-built man, with large, clean, remarkably steady hands.

Trying to ignore this irrelevant observation, he asked whether powder of different grades was produced.

Hoskins frowned, considering.

"Well, can be, of course. That's what the corning's for—" He nodded at one of the flimsily built wooden sheds. "The finer the powder's ground and corned into grains, the more explosive it is. But then, the finer it's corned, the riskier it is to handle. That's why the milling sheds are built like that"—he nodded at one—"roofs and walls nobbut sheets of wood, cobbled together, loose-like. If one should go up, why, then, it's easy to pick up the bits and put them back together."

"Indeed. What about anyone who might have been working in the shed when it ... went up?" Grey asked, feeling his mouth dry a little at the thought.

Hoskins smiled briefly, eyes creasing.

"Not so easy. What you asked, though—in practice, we make only the one grade of powder at this mill, as it's all sold to the Ordnance Office for artillery. Hard enough to pass their tests; we do better than most mills, and even so, a good quarter of some batches turns out dud when they test it at Woolwich. Not that any o' that is *our* fault, mind. Some others is mebbe not so careful, naming no names."

Grey recalled the incessant thuds from the proving grounds.

"Oh, pray do," he said. "Name names, I mean."

Hoskins laughed. He was missing a tooth, far back on one side, but for the most part, his teeth were still good.

"Well, there's the three owners in the consortium—"

"Wait—what consortium is this?"

Hoskins looked surprised.

"Mr. DeVane didn't tell you? There's him, and Mr. Trevorson, what

owns Mayapple Farm, downriver—" He lifted his chin, pointing. "And then Mr. Fanshawe, beyond; Mudlington, his place is called. They went in together to bid the contracts for powder with the government, so as to be able to hold their own with the bigger powder mills like Waltham. So the powder's kegged and shipped all as one, marked with the consortium's name, but it's made separate at the three mills. And as I say, not everyone's as careful as what we are here."

He looked over the assemblage of buildings with a modest pride, but Grey paid no attention.

"Marked with the consortium's name," he repeated, his heart beating faster. "What name is that?"

"Oh. Just DeVane, as your brother's the principal owner."

"Indeed," Grey said. "How interesting."



Edgar had gone on about his own business, offering to send back a horse for Grey. He had refused this offer, not wishing to seem an invalid—and feeling that he might profit from the solitary walk back across the fields, having considerable new information to think about.

The news of the consortium of powder-mill owners put a different complexion on the matter altogether.

We make only the one grade of powder at this mill, Hoskins had said. Grey had overlooked the slight emphasis at the time, but in retrospect, was sure it had been there.

The implication was plain; one or another of the consortium's mills *did* make the higher grades of black powder required for grenades, muskets, and rifle cartridges. He thought of turning back to ask Hoskins which mill might provide the more explosive powder, but thought better of it. He could check that with Edgar.

He must also ask Edgar to invite the other mill owners to Blackthorn Hall. He should speak with them in any case, and it was likely best to do that *en masse*, so that none of them should feel personally accused, and thus wary. He might also be able to gain some information from seeing them together, watching to see what the relations among them were.

Could there possibly be truth behind Lord Marchmont's insinuations of sabotage? If so—and he was still highly inclined to doubt it—then

it became at least understandable why Marchmont should have mentioned Edgar by name.

No matter which mill had actually produced it, any suspicious powder would have been identified simply with the DeVane mark—a simplified version of Edgar's family arms, showing two chevrons quartered with an odd heraldic bird, a small, footless thing called a martlet. Hoskins had shown him the half-loaded barge at anchor in the river, stacked with powder kegs, all branded with that mark.

The sun was still obscured, but faintly visible; a small, hazy disk directly overhead. Seeing it, and becoming aware from interior gurglings that it had been a long time since breakfast, he considered what to do next.

There was time to ride to Mudling Parva. The obvious first step in doing as he had promised Mr. Lister was to interview the Reverend Mr. Thackeray, for any indications he might be able to provide of his errant daughter's whereabouts.

He could, though, reasonably leave that errand for the morrow, and return to Blackthorn Hall for luncheon. He must speak to Edgar about the consortium. And Maude had mentioned at breakfast that a friend or two from the county would be joining them.

"Hmm," he said.

His relations with his elder half brothers had always been distant but cordial—save for the occasion when, aged ten, he had unwisely expressed the opinion that Edgar's fiancée was an overbearing doggess, and been clouted halfway across the room in consequence. His opinion of his sister-in-law had not altered in subsequent years, but he *had* learned to keep his opinions to himself.

Perhaps he would leave a note for Edgar and find some sort of sustenance on his way to the village.

He walked on, enjoying the spongy give of the earth beneath his boots, and returned to his contemplation of black powder. Or tried to. Within a few moments, though, he became aware that he was not thinking so much of the consortium, or of his new knowledge of the process of powder-making ... but of Bill Hoskins.

The realization unsettled him. He had not responded in that visceral way to a man's physical presence since—well, since before Crefeld.

He hadn't really supposed that that part of him was dead, but had been content to leave it dormant, preoccupied as he had been with other matters, such as survival. If anything, though, he had expected that it might return slowly, healing gradually, as the rest of his body did.

Nothing gradual about it. Sexual interest had sprung up, sudden and vivid as a steel-struck spark, ready to ignite anything flammable in the vicinity.

Not that anything was. There was not the slightest indication that Hoskins had any such proclivities—and even had Hoskins been giving him a blatantly rolling eyeball of invitation, Grey would in no case approach someone in his brother's orbit, let alone his employ.

No, it was nothing but simple appreciation.

Still, when he came to the stile where he had been stricken on the way out, he did not climb it, but seized the rail of the fence and vaulted over, then walked on, whistling "Lilibulero."



Upon due consideration, Grey left Tom Byrd at the ordinary in Mudling Parva, with enough money to render half a dozen men indiscreet, if not outright insensible, and instructions to gather whatever tidbits of local gossip might be obtained under these circumstances. He himself proceeded, in his soberest clothes, to the home of the Reverend Mr. Thackeray, where he introduced himself by title, rather than rank, as a club acquaintance of Philip Lister's, interested in the welfare of Anne Thackeray.

From Mr. Lister's description of the minister, Grey had been expecting something tall and cadaverous, equipped with piercing eye and booming voice. The reality was something resembling a pug dog belonging to his friend Lucinda, Lady Joffrey: small, with a massively wrinkled face and slightly bulging eyes at the front, the impression of a wagging curly tail at the back.

The Reverend Mr. Thackeray's air of effusive welcome diminished substantially, however, when informed of Lord John's business.

"I am afraid I cannot tell you anything regarding my late daughter, sir," he said, repressed, but still courteous. "I know nothing of her movements since her departure from my house."

"Is your daughter ... deceased?" Grey asked cautiously. "I was unaware ..."

"She is dead to us," the minister said, shaking his head dolefully. "And might better be dead in all truth, rather than to be living in a

state of grievous sin. We can but hope."

"Er ... quite." Grey sipped at the tea he had been offered, pausing to regroup, then essayed a different sally. "Should she be alive, though—perhaps with a child ..."

The Reverend Mr. Thackeray's eyes bulged further at the thought, and Grey coughed.

"I hesitate to voice the observation for fear of seeming crude, and I can but trust to your courtesy to overlook my presumption—but Lieutenant Lister actually *is* dead," he pointed out. "Your daughter—and perhaps her offspring—is therefore presumably left without protection. Would you not wish to receive news of her, perhaps to offer aid, even if you feel unable to accept her home again?"

"No, sir." Mr. Thackeray spoke with regret, but most decidedly. "She has chosen the path of ruin and damnation. There is no turning back."

"You will pardon my ignorance, sir—but does your faith not preach the possibility of redemption for sinners?"

The minister's amiably wrinkled countenance contracted, and Grey perceived the small, sharp teeth behind the upper lip.

"We pray for her soul," he said. "Of course. And that she will perceive the error of her ways, repent, and thus perhaps be allowed at last to enter the kingdom of God."

"But you have no desire that she should receive forgiveness while still alive?" Grey had intended to remain aloofly courteous throughout the interview, no matter what was said, but found himself becoming irritated—whether with the Reverend Mr. Thackeray's sanctimony or his illogic, he was not sure.

"Certainly we should attempt to emulate Our Lord in forgiving," the minister said, twitching the bands of his coat straight and drawing himself as upright as his diminutive stature would permit. "But we cannot be seen to suffer licentiousness and lewd behavior. What example would I be to my congregation, were I to accept into my home a young woman who had suffered such public and flagrant moral ruin, the fruit of her sin apparent for all to see?"

"So she *has* borne a child?" Grey asked, pouncing upon this last injudicious phrase.

All of the reverend's wrinkles flushed dark red and he stood abruptly.

"I fear that I can spare you no more time, Lord John. I have a great many engagements this afternoon. If you will—" He was interrupted by the parlor maid who had brought tea, who bobbed a curtsy from the doorway.

"Your pardon, sir; it's Captain Fanshawe come."

The choler left the Reverend's face at once.

"Oh," he said. He glanced quickly at Grey, then at the doorway. Grey could see the figure of a tall man, standing in the hallway just beyond the maid.

"Captain Fanshawe ... would that be Captain Marcus Fanshawe, perhaps?" Grey asked politely. "I believe we are members of the same club." He'd met the man briefly on that last, riotous visit to White's, he thought.

The minister nodded like a clockwork doll, but looked back and forth between Grey and the doorway, exhibiting marked perplexity and what looked like embarrassment.

Grey was somewhat perplexed himself. He was also angry with himself for having allowed his personal opinions to intrude on the conversation. No help now but to retreat in good order, perhaps leaving enough goodwill to provide for another visit later. He rose and bowed.

"I thank you for receiving me, sir. I can show myself out."

The Reverend Mr. Thackeray and the maid both gave sharp gasps as he strode through the door, and the minister made a brief movement as though to prevent him, but Grey ignored it.

The man in the hall was dressed in ordinary riding clothes, his hat in his hand. He turned sharply at Grey's appearance, surprised.

Grey nodded toward the newcomer, hoping that his face did not reveal the shock he felt at Fanshawe's appearance. It was the sort of face that drew both men and women, dark and arresting in its beauty —or had been. One eye remained, sapphire-colored, dark-lashed, and framed by an arch of black brow, a perfect jewel.

The other was invisible, whether injured or destroyed, he had no idea. A black silk scarf was bound across Fanshawe's brow, a bar sinister whose starkness cut across a mass of melted, lividly welted flesh. The nose was mostly gone; only the blunt darkness of the nostrils remained. He had the horrid fancy that they stared, inviting him—almost *compelling* him—to look through them into Fanshawe's brain.

"Your servant, sir," he heard himself say, bowing automatically.

"And yours."

Had he ever heard Fanshawe's voice before? It was colorless,

correct, with the slightest tinge of Sussex. Fanshawe turned at a sound from the parlor door, and Grey felt suddenly faint. Part of the captain's head had been caved in, leaving a shocking depression above the ear, nearly a quarter of the skull ... gone. How had he lived?

Grey bowed again, murmuring something meaningless, and escaped, finding himself in the road without noticing how he had got there.

His heart was beating fast and he felt the taste of bile at the back of his throat. He tried to erase the vision of Fanshawe's head from his mind, but it was no use. The ruined face was terrible to look upon, and filled him with a piercing regret for the loss of beauty—though he had seen such things before. But that sickening place, where the eye expected a solid curve of skull and found emptiness instead, was peculiarly shocking, even to a professional soldier.

He stood still, eyes closed, and breathed slowly, concentrating on the sharp autumnal odors round him: chimney smoke and the sweet scent of windfall apples, rotting in the grass; damp earth and dead leaves, the bitter smell of hawthorn fruits, cut straw, used to mulch the flower beds in Thackeray's garden. Soap—

Soap? His eyes flew open and he saw that the branches of the hedgerow beside him were heaving.

"Psst!" said the hedge.

"I beg your pardon?" he replied, leaning to look closer. Through the spiny branches of a hawthorn, he made out the anxious face of a young woman, perhaps eighteen or so, whose large, prominent eyes and upturned nose betrayed a close resemblance to the pug-like Mr. Thackeray.

"May I speak to you, sir?" she said, eyes imploring.

"I believe you are, madam, but if you wish to continue doing so, perhaps it would be easier were I to meet you yonder?" He nodded down the road, to a gap where there was a gate set into the hedge.

The clean-smelling young woman met him there, her face pink with cold air and flusterment.

"You will think me forward, sir, but I—Oh, and I *do* apologize, sir, but I couldn't help overhearing, and when you spoke to Father about Annie ..."

"I collect you are ... Miss Thackeray?"

"Oh, I am sorry, sir." She bobbed him an anxious curtsy, her ruffled cap clean and white, like a fresh mushroom. "I am Barbara Thackeray.

My sister is Miss Thackeray—or—or was," she corrected, blushing deeply.

"Is your sister deceased, then?" Grey inquired, as gently as possible. "Or married?"

"Oh, sir!" She gave him a wide-eyed look. "I do *hope* she is married, and not—not the other. She wrote to me, and said she and Philip meant to be married ever so soon as they might. She is a good girl, Annie; you must not pay attention to anyone who tells you otherwise, indeed you must not!" She looked quite fierce at this, like a small pug dog seizing the edge of a carpet in its teeth, and he nearly laughed, but stopped himself in time.

"She wrote to you, you say?" He glanced involuntarily back at the house, and she correctly interpreted the look.

"She sent a letter in care of Simon Coles, the lawyer. He is—a friend." Her color deepened. "It was but a brief note, to assure me of her welfare. But I have heard nothing since. And when we heard that Philip—that Lieutenant Lister—was killed ... Oh, my fears for her will destroy me, sir, pray believe me!"

She looked so distressed that Grey had no difficulty in believing her, and so assured her.

"May I—may I ask, sir, why you have come?" she asked, pinkening further. "You do not *know* anything of Anne, yourself?"

"No. I came in hopes of learning something regarding her whereabouts. You are familiar with Lieutenant Lister's family, I collect?"

She nodded, brows knit.

"Well, Mr. Lister is most desirous of discovering your sister's current circumstances, and offering what assistance he might, for his son's sake," he said carefully. He really did not know whether Lister would be interested in helping the young woman if she had *not* given birth to Philip Lister's child, but there was no point in mentioning that possibility.

"Oh," she breathed, a slight look of hope coming into her face. "Oh! So you are a friend of Mr. Lister's? It was wise of you not to tell Father so. He holds the Listers responsible entirely for my sister's disgrace ... and in all truth," she added, with a trace of bitterness, "I cannot say he is wrong to do so. If only Marcus ... He would have quit the army for Anne's sake, I know he would. And of course now he is invalided out, but ..."

"Captain Fanshawe was an-a suitor of Miss Thackeray's?" Grey

said, hastily substituting that term for the more vulgar "admirer."

Barbara Thackeray nodded, looking troubled.

"Oh, yes. He and Philip both wished to marry her. My sister could not choose between them, and my father disliked them equally, because of their profession. But then—" She glanced back at the house, involuntarily. "Did you *see* Marcus?"

"Yes," Grey said, unable to repress a small shiver of revulsion. "What happened to him?"

She shuddered in sympathy.

"Is it not terrible? He will not allow me or my younger sisters to see him, save he is masked. But Shelby—the parlor maid—told me what he is like. It was an explosion."

"What—a cannon?" Grey asked, with a certain feeling of nightmare. She shook her head, though.

"No, sir. The Fanshawes own a powder mill, by the river. One of the buildings went—they do, you know, every so often; we hear the bang sometimes, in the distance, so dreadful! Two workmen were killed; Marcus lived, though everyone says it would have been a mercy had he not."

Shortly after this tragedy, Philip Lister had eloped with Anne Thackeray, and bar that one short note, evidently nothing further was known of her whereabouts.

"She said that Philip had found her a suitable lodging in Southwark, and that the landlady was most obliging. Is that a help?" Barbara asked hopefully.

"It may be." Grey tried not to imagine how many obliging landladies there might be in Southwark. "Do you know—did your sister take away any jewelry with her?" The first—perhaps the only—thing a young woman left suddenly destitute might do was to pawn or sell her jewelry. And there might be fewer pawnbrokers in Southwark than landladies.

"Well ... yes. At least ... I suppose she did." She looked doubtful. "I could look. Her things ... Father wished to dispose of them, and had them packed up, but I—well, I could not bear to part with them." She blushed, looking down. "I ... persuaded Simon to speak to the drover who took away the boxes; they are in his shed, I believe."

A distant shout made her look over her shoulder, startled.

"They are looking for me. I must go," she said, already gathering her skirts for flight. "Where do you stay, sir?"

"At Blackthorn Hall," Grey said. "Edgar DeVane is my brother."

Her eyes flew wide at that, and he saw her look closely at him for the first time, blinking.

"He is?"

"My half brother," he amended dryly, seeing that she was taken slightly back by his appearance.

"Oh! Yes," she said uncertainly, but then her face changed as another shout came from the direction of the house. "I must go. I will send to you about the jewelry. And thank you, sir, ever so much!"

She gave him a quick, low curtsy, then picked up her skirts and fled, gray-striped stockings flashing as she ran.

"Hmm!" he said. Used as he was to general approbation of his person, he was amused to discover that his vanity was mildly affronted at her plain astonishment that such an insignificant sort as himself should be brother to the darkly dramatic Edgar DeVane. He laughed at himself, and turned back toward the spot where he had left Edgar's horse, swishing his stick through the hedge as he passed.

Despite her rather prominent eyes and her lack of appreciation for his own appearance, he liked Barbara Thackeray. So, obviously, did Simon Coles. He hoped Coles was a more acceptable candidate for marriage than Lister or Fanshawe had been, for the young woman's sake.

He rather thought he must go and speak to lawyer Coles. Because while Barbara had received only the one note from her sister, both her father and Mr. Lister appeared to believe that Anne had later borne a child. It was possible, he thought, that Simon Coles knew why.



He was not sure what he had expected of Simon Coles, but the reality was different. The lawyer was a slight young man, with sandy hair, a sprinkling of freckles across a thin, homely face, and a withered leg.

"Lord John Grey ... *Major* Grey?" he exclaimed, leaning eagerly forward over his desk. "But I know you—know *of* you, I should say," he corrected himself.

"You do?" Once again, Grey found himself uneasy at being the unwitting subject of conversation. Perhaps Edgar had mentioned his impending arrival; he *had* sent a note ahead to Blackthorn Hall.

"Yes, yes! I am sure of it! Let me show you." Reaching for the

padded crutch that leaned against the wall, he tucked it deftly beneath one arm and swung himself out from behind the desk, heading so briskly for the bookshelves across the room that Grey was obliged to step out of the way.

"Now where ...?" the lawyer murmured, running a finger across a row of books. "Ah, yes, just here, just here!"

Pulling down a large double folio, he bundled it across to the desk, where he flung it open and flicked the pages, revealing it to be a sort of compendium, wherein Grey recognized accounts from various newspapers, carefully cut out and pasted onto the pages. For variety, he glimpsed a number of illustrated broadsheets, and even a few ballad sheets, tucked amongst the pages.

"There! I knew it must be the same, though Grey is not an uncommon name. The circumstances, though—I daresay you found those sufficiently uncommon, did you not, Major?" He looked up with sparkling eyes, his finger planted on a cutting.

Unwilling, Grey felt still compelled to look, and was mortified to read a recently published and highly colored account of his saving a cannon—the gun reported as being named "Tod Belcher"—from the hands of a ravening horde of Austrians after the tragic and untimely demise of the gun's captain. He, Grey, having personally swept an oncoming Austrian cavalry officer from his saddle, then pinned him to the ground with his sword through the officer's coat, demanded and accepted his surrender, and then (by report) had fought the gun virtually single-handed, the rest of the crew having been slain by the accident which took the life of "Philbert Lester," the doomed captain, whose detached limbs had been scattered to the four winds, and his bowels torn out. Rather oddly, the explosion of the cannon that had concluded this remarkable passage at arms was treated in a single offhand sentence.

Whoever had written this piece of bombast *had* managed, to Grey's amazement, both to spell his own name correctly—scarcely a blessing, in the circumstances—and to note that the event had occurred in Germany.

"But Mr. Coles!" Grey said, aghast. "This—this—it is the most arrant poppycock!"

"Oh, now, Major, you must not be modest," Coles assured him, wringing him by the hand. "You must not seek to lessen the honor your presence grants to my office, you know!"

He laughed merrily, and Grey, with a feeling of helplessness, found

himself obliged to smile and bow in an awkward parody of graciousness.

Coles's clerk, a youth named Boggs, was summoned in to meet the hero of Crefeld, then sent off in a state of wide-eyed excitement to fetch refreshment—against Grey's protests—from the local ordinary. Where, Grey reflected grimly, he was no doubt presently recounting the whole idiotic story to anyone who would listen. He resolved to finish his business in Mudling Parva as quickly as possible, and decamp back to London before Edgar and Maude got wind of the newspaper story.

As it was, he had considerable trouble in getting Mr. Coles to attend to the matter in hand, as the lawyer wished to ask him any number of questions regarding Germany, his experiences in the army, his opinion of the current political situation, and what it was like to kill someone.

"What is it like ..." Grey said, thoroughly taken aback. "To—In battle, I suppose you mean?"

"Well, yes," said Coles, his eagerness slightly—though only slightly—abating. "Surely you have not been slaughtering your fellow citizens in cold blood, Major?" He laughed, and Grey joined—politely—in the laughter, wondering what in God's name to say next.

He was fortunately saved by Coles's own sense of propriety—evidently he did have one, overborne though it was by gusts of enthusiasm.

"You must forgive me, Major," Coles said, sobering a little. "I am sure the matter is a sensitive one. I should not have asked—and I beg pardon for so intruding upon your feelings. It is only that I have always had a strong and most ... abiding *admiration* for the profession of war."

"You do?"

"Yes. Oh, there you are, Boggs! Thank you, thank you ... yes, you will have some wine, I hope, Major? Allow me, please. Yes," he repeated, settling back in his chair and waving his reluctant clerk firmly out of the room. "Many of the men of my family in previous generations have taken up commissions—my great-grandfather fought in Holland—and I should no doubt have pursued the same career myself, were it not for this." He gestured ruefully toward his leg.

"Thus my fascination with the subject. I have made a small study of military history"—this was obviously modesty speaking, Grey thought, judging by the impressive collection on the shelves behind him, which seemed to include everyone from Tacitus and Caesar to

King Frederick of Prussia—"and have even been so bold as to compose a brief essay upon the history of siege warfare. I, um, do not suppose you have ever been involved personally in a siege, have you, Major?"

"No, no," Grey said hurriedly. He had been penned up in Edinburgh Castle with the rest of the government troops during the Jacobite occupation of the city, but it was a siege in name only; the Jacobites had had no thought of battering their way into the castle, let alone of starving out the inhabitants.

"Mr. Coles," he said, inspired by thought of battering rams, and seeing that the only way of progressing in his own interest was by bluntness, "I collect that you are acquainted with the Thackeray family—specifically, with a Miss Barbara Thackeray?"

Coles blinked, looking almost comically nonplussed.

"Oh! Yes," he said, a little uncertain. "Of course. I, er, have the honor to consider myself a friend of the family." Meaning, Grey thought, that Mr. Thackeray was probably unaware of Coles's friendship with Barbara.

"I flatter myself that I may count myself a friend to them, as well," Grey said, "though our acquaintance is so new." He smiled, and Coles, sunny by disposition, smiled back.

An understanding thus established, there seemed no reason to avoid mention of Mr. Lister with Coles, and so Grey put the matter before him straightforwardly.

"Miss Barbara said that she had had a note from her sister, forwarded by your kind offices," Grey said carefully, and Coles blushed.

"I should have taken it to her father, I know," he said awkwardly. "But ... but ... she ... I mean, Miss Barbara Thackeray is ..."

"A friend," Grey finished for him, echoing Barbara Thackeray's own words—spoken, he noted, with precisely the same blushing intonation. "Of course."

Skating away from that delicate subject, he said, "Mr. Lister believes there is a possibility that Anne Thackeray is or was with child. From something that Mr. Thackeray let slip during our conversation, I believe he may have the same impression. I wonder, Mr. Coles, whether you can shed any light on this possibility?"

For the first time, Coles looked uneasy.

"I have no idea," he said. Grey thought it was as well the young lawyer was a country solicitor; someone with so little talent for lying would fare ill before the Bench. "Mr. Coles," he said, letting a bit of steel show in his voice, "it is a question of the young woman's life."

The lawyer paled a little, the freckles on his cheeks standing out.

"Oh. Well ... I, er ..."

"Did you receive any further communications from Anne Thackeray?"

"Yes," Coles said, succumbing with a distinct air of relief. "Just the one. It was addressed to me, rather than to Barbara—I should not have read it, else. It was written just before the news came of Philip's death; she did not know of it."

Grey noted the familiarity of the Christian name, and thought that Coles must have known Philip Lister personally—but of course he did. This was not London; everyone knew everyone—and very likely, everything about them.

Anne Thackeray had written in desperation, saying that she had recently discovered herself to be with child, had exhausted the money Philip had left for her, and was near the end of her resources. She had appealed to Simon Coles to intercede for her with her father.

"Which I did—or tried to." Coles wiped his nose with a crumpled handkerchief, which, Grey noted, he wore in his sleeve, like a soldier. "My efforts were not, alas, successful."

"The Reverend Mr. Thackeray does seem a trifle ... strict in his views," Grey observed.

Coles nodded, tucking away the handkerchief.

"You must not think too hardly of him," he said earnestly. "He is a good man, a most excellent minister. But he has always been very ... firm ... with his family. And his daughters' virtue is naturally a matter of the greatest importance."

"Greater than their physical well-being, evidently," Grey observed caustically, but then dismissed that with a wave. "So, when Mr. Thackeray refused to listen, you naturally went to Mr. Lister."

Coles looked embarrassed.

"It was professionally quite wrong of me, I know. Indiscreet, at best, and most presumptuous. But I really did not know what else to do, and I thought that perhaps the Listers would be more inclined to ..."

But they hadn't. Mr. Lister had sent the young lawyer away with a flea in his ear. But that, of course, was before Philip Lister had been killed.

"What was the address on the letter?" Grey asked. "If she expected help, surely she must have given an address to which it could be sent."

"She did give an address, in Southwark." Coles took up his neglected glass of wine and swallowed, avoiding Grey's gaze. "I—I could not ignore her plea, you see. I—we—that is, I prevailed upon a mutual friend to take some money to her, and to see how she fared. I would have gone myself, but ..." He indicated his crutch.

"Did he find her?"

"No. He came back in some agitation of mind, and reported that she was gone."

"Gone?" Grey echoed. "Gone where?"

"I don't know." The young lawyer looked thoroughly miserable. "He inquired in every place he could think of, but was unable to discover any clue to her whereabouts. Her landlady said that Anne—Miss Thackeray—had been unable to pay her account, and had thus been put out of her room. The woman had no idea where she had gone then."

"Not very obliging of her," Grey observed.

"No. I—I tried to make further inquiries. I hired a commercial inquiry agent in London, but he made no further discoveries. Oh, if only I had sent to her at once!" Coles cried, his face contorting in sudden anguish.

"I should not have wasted so much time in thinking how to approach her father, in screwing up my courage to go to the Listers, but I was afraid, afraid to speak to them, afraid of failing—and yet I did fail. I am a coward, and whatever has become of Anne is all my fault. How am I to look her sister in the face?"

It took Grey some time to console and reassure the young lawyer, and his efforts were only partially successful. In the end, Coles was restored to some semblance of resolution by Grey's recounting of his conversation with Barbara regarding her sister's jewelry.

"Yes. Yes! I do have Anne's boxes, safely in my shed. I will look them out this afternoon. We must make some pretext, Barbara and I, to meet and examine them—"

"I am sure that such a challenge will prove no bar to someone with your extensive study of strategy and tactics," Grey assured him, rising from his chair. "If you or Miss Barbara will then send me a note, describing any trinkets that may be missing ...?"

He took his leave, and was nearly out the door when Coles called after him.

"Major?"

He turned to see the young lawyer leaning on his desk, his quicksilver face for once settled into seriousness.

"Yes, Mr. Coles?"

"What I asked you ... what it feels like to have killed someone in battle ... that was mere vulgar curiosity. But it makes me think. I hope I have not killed Anne Thackeray. But if I have—you will tell me? I think I would prefer to know, rather than to fear."

Grey smiled at him.

"You would have made a good soldier, Mr. Coles. Yes, I'll tell you. Good day."



"Any joy, Tom?"

"Dunno as I'd go so far, me lord." Tom looked dubious, and put a hand to his mouth to stifle a belch. "I will say as the Goose and Grapes has very good beer. Grub's not so good as the Lark's Nest, but not bad. Did you get summat to eat, me lord?"

"Oh, yes," Grey said, dismissing the matter. In fact, his sole consumption since breakfast had been half a slice of fruitcake at Mr. Thackeray's, and a considerable quantity of wine, taken in Mr. Coles's company. It had come, he was sure, from the Goose and Grapes, but had not shared the excellent quality of the beer. It had, however, been strong, and his head showed a disturbing disposition to spin slightly if he moved too suddenly. Luckily the horse knew the way home.

"Were you able to hear anything about the Thackerays, the Listers, the Fanshawes, the Trevorsons—or for that matter, the DeVanes?"

"Oh, a good bit about all of 'em, me lord. Especially about Mrs. DeVane." He grinned.

"I daresay. Well, perhaps we can save that for entertainment on our journey back to London," Grey said dryly. "What about the Fanshawes and Trevorsons?"

Tom squinted, considering. He had declined to share Grey's horse, and was walking alongside.

"Squire Trevorson's a sporting man, they say. Gambling, aye?" "In debt?"

"To his eyeballs," Tom said cheerfully. "They didn't know for sure, but the talk is his place—Mayapple Farm, it's called, and there's an

unlucky name for you—is mortgaged to the eaves."

"What the hell is unlucky about it?"

Tom glanced up at Grey's unaccustomed sharpness, but answered mildly.

"A mayapple's a thing grows in the Americas, me lord. The red Indians use it for medicine, they say, but it's poison otherwise."

Grey digested this for a moment.

"Has Trevorson got connexions in America, then?"

"Yes, me lord. An uncle in Canada, and two younger brothers in Boston and Philadelphia."

"Indeed. And does popular knowledge extend to the politics of these connexions?" It seemed far-fetched, but if sabotage were truly involved in the cannon explosions—and Quarry seemed to think it might be—then the loyalties of Trevorson's family might become a point of interest.

The denizens of the Goose and Grapes had not possessed any knowledge on that point, though—or at least had volunteered none. About the Fanshawes, talk had been voluble, but centered about the terrible misfortune that had befallen Marcus; nothing to the discredit of his father, Douglas Fanshawe, seemed to be known.

"Captain Fanshawe got himself blown up in one o' the milling sheds," Tom informed Grey. "Tore off half his face, they said!"

"For once, public comment is understated. I saw the captain at the Thackerays."

"Cor, you saw him?" Tom was awed. "Was it as bad as they say, then?"

"Much worse. Did anyone talk about the accident? Do they know what happened?"

Tom shook his head.

"Nobody knows but Captain Fanshawe. He's the only one that lived, and he doesn't talk to anybody save the Reverend Mr. Thackeray."

"He does talk to Thackeray?"

"Aye, me lord. He goes there regular to visit, but nowhere else. It'll be weeks on end when no one sees him—and folk don't speak when they do; he's a proper creepy sight, they say, going about in a black silk mask and everybody a-knowing what's behind it. The reverend treats him very kind, though, they say."

Grey remembered Coles, young and earnest, saying, *You must not think too hardly of him. He is a good man, a most excellent minister.* Evidently Thackeray did have some bowels of compassion, even if not

for his daughter.

"Speaking of Thackeray, did you learn anything there?"

"Well, there was a deal of gossip," Tom said doubtfully. "Not really what you'd call information, like. Just folk arguing was Miss Anne a wicked trollop or was she se-dyuced"—he pronounced it carefully —"by Lieutenant Lister."

"One side or the other prevalent?"

Tom shook his head.

"No, me lord. Six of one, half a dozen o' the other."

Opinion had been likewise divided as to the schism in the local Methodist congregation that had culminated in the Listers being ousted. Comment had been prolonged and colorful, but there appeared to be no useful kernels of information in it.

News exhausted, silence fell between them. The sun had long since set, and cold darkness crept up from the fallow fields on either side. Tom Byrd was no more than a shadow, pacing by his stirrup, patient as de—Grey drew himself up in the saddle, shaking his head to drive off the thought.

"You all right, me lord?" Tom asked, suspicions at once aroused. "You're not a-going to fall off that nag, are you?"

"Certainly not," Grey said crisply. In fact, he was desperately tired, hunger and unaccustomed exertion weighting his limbs.

"You been overdoing. I knew it," Tom said, with gloomy relish. "You'd best go straight to bed, me lord, with a bit o' bread and milk."



Grey did not, of course, go to bed, dearly as he would have liked to.

Instead, hastily washed, brushed, and changed by a disapproving Tom Byrd, he went down to supper to meet the consortium, all hastily summoned by Edgar at his request.

Matters did not proceed as smoothly as he had hoped. For one thing, Maude was present, and loud in her disbelief that anyone could suppose that the sacred name of DeVane could be disparaged in this wanton fashion.

Edgar, bolstered by support from the distaff side, kept thwacking a metaphorical riding crop against his leg, clearly imagining the prospect of thrashing Lord Marchmont or Colonel Twelvetrees with it. Grey admitted the charming nature of the notion, but found the repetition of the sentiment wearing.

As for Fanshawe and Trevorson, both appeared to be exactly as described—an honest, rather dull farmer, and a slightly reckless country squire, given to ostentatious waistcoats. Both were bugeyed with shock at news of what had been said at the Commission of Inquiry, and both professed complete bewilderment at what the commission could possibly have been thinking.

Ignorance did not, of course, prevent their speculating.

"Marchmont," Trevorson said, in tones of puzzlement. "I confess I do not understand this at all. If it had been—you did say Mortimer Oswald was a member of this ... body?"

"Yes," Grey said, though he forbore nodding, fearing that his head might fall off. "Why?"

Trevorson humphed into his claret cup.

"Snake," he said briefly. "No doubt he put Marchmont up to it. Feebleminded collop."

Grey tried to form some sensible question in response to this information, but could make no connexion between Marchmont's feeblemindedness, Oswald's presumably serpentlike nature, and the problem at hand. The hell with it, he decided, glassy-eyed. He'd ask Edgar in the morning.

"Ridiculous!" Fanshawe was saying. "What idiocy is this? Explode a cannon by loading it with tricky powder? A thousand times more likely that the gun crew made some error." He smacked a hand down on the table. "I'll wager you a hundred guineas, some arsehole panicked and double-loaded the thing!"

"What odds?" Trevorson drawled, making the table rock with laughter. Grey felt the muscles near his mouth draw back, miming laughter, but the words echoed in the pit of his stomach, mixing uneasily with the roast fowl and prunes.

Some arsehole panicked ...

"John, you haven't touched the trifle! Here, you must have some, it is my own invention, made with gooseberry conserve from the gardens...." Maude waved the butler in his direction, and he could not find will to protest as a large, gooey mass was dolloped onto his plate.

Exercised by his revelations, the members of the consortium kept him late, the brandy bottle passing up and down the table as they argued whether they should go in a body to London to refute this monstrous allegation, or send one of their membership as representative, in which case ought it be DeVane, as the largest mill owner—

"I believe that to make such a formal representation would merely inflame a matter that is at present not truly serious," Grey said firmly, suffering nightmare visions of Edgar striding into Parliament, armed with a horsewhip.

"A letter, then!" Fanshawe suggested, red-faced with brandy and indignation. "We cannot let such scurrilous insinuations pass unaddressed, surely!"

"Yes, yes, must compose a letter of complaint." Trevorson was slurring his words, but his oxlike eyes swiveled toward Grey. "You would take it, aye? She ... see"—he wiped a dribble of saliva from the corner of his mouth—"that it is delivered to this iniqui-tous Commission of In-qui-ree."

That motion passed by acclamation, Grey's attempts at reason being shouted down and drowned in bumpers of brandy.

At last, he dragged himself upstairs, leaving the consortium to the amiable exercise of composing insulting epithets amid shouts of laughter, Edgar—as the only one still sober enough to write—being charged with committing these to paper.

Head pounding and clothes reeking of tobacco smoke, he pushed open the door to his room, to find Tom reclining in a chair by the hearth, immersed in *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle*. The young valet hopped up at once, put by his book, and came to take Grey's coat and waistcoat.

Having briskly stripped his master and draped him in a clean nightshirt, he went to retrieve Grey's banyan, which had been hung to warm on the fire screen. He held this ready, peering closely at Grey in concern.

"You look like ..." he said, and trailed off, shaking his head as though the prospect before him was too frightful for words. This matched Grey's own impression of the situation, but he was too exhausted to say so, and merely nodded, turning to thrust his arms into the comforting sleeves.

"Go to bed, Tom," he managed to say. "Don't wake me in the morning. I plan to be dead."

"Very good, me lord," Tom said, and lips pressed tight, went out, holding Grey's wine-stained, sweat-damp, tobacco-smelling shirt at arm's length before him.



He had intended to fall directly upon his bed, but found that he could not. He was in that irritating state where one is exhausted beyond bearing, but so frayed of nerve as to find the mere thought of sleep unimaginable.

He sat down by the fire and picked up Tom's book, but found the words swim before his eyes and put it down again. Liquor surged through his veins, weariness clung to his limbs like spring mud, and it seemed an impossible effort to rise. Still, he did it, and wandered slowly round the room, touching things at random, as though in hopes of anchoring his thoughts, which—in distinct contrast to his body—were scuttling round in circles at a high rate of speed.

He opened the window; fresh air might clear his head. The smell of dark, cold earth rushed in, chilling him with its menace, and he shut the window hastily, fumbling at the catch. He leaned his head against the cold glass then for a time, staring at the moon, which was at the half, large and yellow as a cheese.

Below, the raucous shouts of the consortium came through the floor. Now they were arguing over the date of their putative letter, as to whether it must be dated today or tomorrow, and whether today was the twenty-first or the twenty-second of November.

November. He was late. Normally, if he was not in the field or on duty, he made his quarterly visit to Helwater in late October, before the roads in the Lake District began to succumb to the autumn rains.

But of course, after what had happened ... Quite without warning, he found himself back in the stable at Helwater, blood pounding through his body and the sound of his own unforgivable words ringing in his ears.

Seized by impulse, he went to the secretary, snatched a sheet of paper, and flipped open the inkwell.

Dear Mr. Fraser,

I write to inform you that I shall not visit Helwater this quarter; official affairs detain me.

He frowned at the paper. He could not possibly sign a letter to a prisoner *Your servant*, no matter that the prisoner in question had once been a gentleman. Something more formal ... yet this *was* the usual formal closure, between gentlemen—and whether Jamie Fraser was now a groom or not ...

"Are you insane?" Grey asked himself, aloud. Why should he think to send a letter, something he had never done, something that would cause no end of curiosity and unwelcome attention at Helwater ... and how could he contemplate the possibility of writing to Fraser at all, given the enormity of what had happened between them at their last meeting?

He rubbed hard at his brow, took the sheet of paper in his hand, and crumpled it. He turned to throw it into the fire, but instead stopped, holding the ball of paper in his hand ... and then sat slowly down again, smoothing the paper upon the desk.

The simple act of writing Fraser's name had given him a sense of connexion, and he realized that the desperate need for such connexion was what had driven him to write it. He realized now that he would never send a letter. Yet that sense lingered—and if such sense was the product only of his need, still it was there.

Why not? If it was no more than talking to himself, perhaps the act of writing down his thoughts would bring them into better order.

"Yes, you are insane," he muttered, but took up his quill. Firmly crossing out *Your servant*, he resumed.

These affairs concern an inquiry into the explosion of a cannon in Germany, June last. I was summoned before an official Commission of Inquiry, which ...

He wrote steadily, pausing now and then to compose a sentence, and found that the exercise did seem to bring his seething thoughts to earth.

He wrote of the commission, Marchmont, Twelvetrees, and Oswald, Edgar and his consortium, Jones, Gormley, the corpse of Tom Pilchard ...

At this point, he was writing so quickly that the letters scrawled across the page, barely legible—and his thoughts, too, had deteriorated as badly as his penmanship. What had begun as a calm, well-reasoned analysis of the situation had become incoherent.

He flung down the quill and resumed his circuit of the room.

Pausing before the looking glass, he glanced at it, then away—then back.

Frozen in place, he stared into the silvered glass, and seemed to see his own features overlaid by Marcus Fanshawe's ruined face. His stomach heaved, and he clapped a hand to his mouth to keep from vomiting. The illusion vanished with the movement, but a ripple of horror ran over him from crown to sole.

He whirled, hand fumbling at his side for an invisible sword, but there was nothing there.

"Oh, Jesus," he said softly. He had—he was sure of it—seen something else in the glass: the vision of Philip Lister, standing behind him.

He closed his eyes, trembling, then opened them, afraid of what he might see. But the room was vacant, quiet save for the hissing of the fire and the rumble of laughter from below.

He had a sudden impulse to dress and go downstairs, even the company of Edgar and his partners seeming welcome. But his legs were trembling, too, and he sat down abruptly in the chair at the desk, obliged to put his head in his hands, lest he faint.

He breathed, eyes shut, for what seemed a very long time, trying not to think of anything. When he opened them again, the scrawled sheets of his unfinished letter lay before him.

His hands were shaking badly, but he took up the quill and, ignoring blots and scratches, began doggedly to write. He had no idea what he wrote, only wanting to find some escape in the words, and found after a time that he was recounting Mr. Lister's visit and that gentleman's remarks anent the profession of arms.

It is a brutal occupation, he wrote, and God help me, if I am no hero, I am damned good at it. You understand, I think, for I know you are the same.

The quill had left marks on his fingers, so tightly as he'd gripped it. He laid it down briefly, rubbing his hand, then took it up again.

God help me further, he wrote, more slowly. I am afraid.

Afraid of what?

Some arsehole panicked....

I am afraid of everything. Afraid of what I may have done, unknowing —of what I might do. I am afraid of death, of mutilation, incapacity—but any soldier fears these things, and fights regardless. I have done it, and—

He wished to write firmly, and will do it again. Instead, the words formed beneath his quill as they formed in his mind; he could not

help but write them.

I am afraid that I might find myself unable. Not only unable to fight, but to command. He looked at that for a moment, and put pen tentatively to the paper once more.

Have you known this fear, I wonder? I cannot think it, from your outward aspect.

That outward aspect was vivid in his mind; Fraser was a man who would never pass unnoticed. Even during their most relaxed and cordial moments, Fraser had never lost his air of command, and when Grey had watched the Scottish prisoners at their work, it was plain that they regarded Fraser as their natural leader, all turning to him as a matter of course.

And then, there had been the matter of the scrap of tartan. He felt hot blood wash through him and his stomach clench with shame and anger. Felt the startling thud of a cat-o'-nine-tails on bare flesh, felt it in the pit of his stomach, searing the skin between his shoulders.

He shut his eyes in reflex, fingers clenching so tightly on the quill that it cracked and bent. He dropped the ruined feather and sat still a moment, breathing, then opened his eyes and reached for another.

Forgive me, he wrote. And then, hardly pausing, And yet why should I beg your forgiveness? God knows that it was your doing, as much as mine. Between your actions and my duty ... But Fraser, too, had acted from duty, even if there was more to the matter. He sighed, crossed out the last bit, and put a period after the words Forgive me.

We are soldiers, you and I. Despite what has lain between us in the past, I trust that ...

That we understand one another. The words spoke themselves in his mind, but what he saw was not the understanding of the burdens of command, nor yet a sharing of the unspoken fears that haunted him, sharp as the sliver of metal next his heart.

What he saw was that one frightful glimpse of nakedness he had surprised in Fraser's face, naked in a way he would wish to see no man naked, let alone a man such as this.

"I understand," he said softly, the sound of the words surprising him. "I wish it were not so."

He looked down at the muddled mess of paper before him, blotched and crumpled, marked with spider blots of confusion and regret. It reminded him of that terse note, written with a burnt stick. Despite everything, Fraser had given him help when he asked it.

Might he ever see Jamie Fraser again? There was a good chance he

would not. If chance did not kill him, cowardice might.

The mania of confession was on him; best make the most of it. His quill had dried; he did not dip it again.

I love you, he wrote, the strokes light and fast, making scarcely a mark upon the paper, with no ink. *I wish it were not so*.

Then he rose, scooped up the scribbled papers, and, crushing them into a ball, threw them into the fire.



He was unfortunately *not* dead when he woke in the morning, but wished he were. Every muscle in his body ached, and the ghastly residue of everything he had drunk clung like dusty fur to the inside of his throbbing head.

Tom Byrd brought him a tray, paused to view the remains, and shook his head in a resigned manner, but said nothing.

Oddly enough, his hands did not shake. Still, he clasped them carefully round his teacup and raised it cautiously to his lips. As he did so, he noticed a letter on the tray, sealed with a blob of crimson wax, in which the initials SC were incised. Simon Coles.

He sat up, narrowly avoiding spilling the tea, and fumbled open the missive, which proved to contain a brief note from the lawyer and a sheet of paper containing several drawings, with penciled descriptions written tidily beneath. Descriptions of the bits of jewelry that Anne Thackeray had taken with her when she eloped with Philip Lister.

"Tom," Grey croaked.

"Yes, me lord?"

"Go tell the stable lad to ready the horses, then pack. We'll leave in an hour."

Both Tom's eyebrows lifted, but he bowed.

"Very good, me lord."



He had hoped to escape from Blackthorn Hall unnoticed, and was in the act of depositing a gracious note of thanks—pleading urgent business as excuse for his abrupt removal—on Edgar's desk, when a voice spoke suddenly behind him.

"John!"

He whirled, guilt stamped upon his features, to find Maude in the doorway, a garden trug over one arm, filled with what looked like onions but were probably daffodil bulbs or something agricultural of the sort.

"Oh. Maude. How pleased I am to see you. I thought I should have to take my leave without expressing my thanks for your kindness. How fortunate—"

"You're leaving us, John? So soon?"

She was a tall woman, and handsome, her dark good looks a proper match for Edgar's. Maude's eyes, however, were not those of a poetess. Something more in the nature of a gorgon's, he had always felt; riveting the attention of her auditors, even though all instinct bade them flee.

"I ... yes. Yes. I received a letter—" He had Coles's note with him, and flourished it as evidence. "I must—"

"Oh, from Mr. Coles, of course. The butler told me he had brought you a note, when he brought me mine."

She was looking at him with a most unaccustomed fondness, which gave him a small chill up the back. This increased when she moved suddenly toward him, setting aside her trug, and cupped a hand behind his head, looking searchingly into his eyes. Her breath was warm on his cheek, smelling of fried egg.

"Are you sure you are quite well enough to travel, my dear?"

"Ahh ... yes," he said. "Quite. Quite sure." God in heaven, did she mean to kiss him?

Thank God, she did not. After examining his face feature by feature, she released him.

"You should have told us, you know," she said reproachfully.

He managed a vaguely interrogative noise in answer to this, and she nodded toward the desk. Where, he now saw, the newspaper cutting referring to him as the Hero of Crefeld was displayed in all its glory, along with a note in Simon Coles's handwriting.

"Oh," he said. "Ah. That. It really—"

"We had not the slightest idea," she said, looking at him with what in a lesser woman would have passed for doe-eyed respect. "You are so modest, John! To think of all you have suffered—it shows so clearly upon your haggard countenance—and to say not a word, even to your family!"

It was a cold day and the library fire had not been lit, but he was beginning to feel very warm. He coughed.

"There is, of course, a certain degree of exaggeration—"

"Nonsense, nonsense. But of course, your natural nobility of character causes you to shun public acclaim, I understand entirely."

"I knew you would," Grey said, giving up. They beamed at each other for a few seconds; then he coughed again and made purposefully to pass her.

"John."

He halted, obedient, and she took him by the arm. She was slightly taller than he was, which he found disquieting, as though she might drag him off to her lair at any moment.

"You will be careful, John?" She was looking at him with such earnest concern that he felt touched, in spite of everything.

"Yes, dear sister," he said, and patted her hand gently. "I will."

Her hand relaxed, and he was able to detach himself without violence. In the moment's delay afforded by the action, though, a belated thought had occurred to him.

"Maude—a question?"

"To be sure, John. What is it?" She paused in the act of picking up her trug, expectant.

"Do you know, perhaps, what would lead Douglas Fanshawe to describe a politician named Mortimer Oswald as a snake?"

She drew herself up, suffering a slight reversion to her former attitude toward him.

"Really, John. Can you possibly be in ignorance of Oswald's despicable behavior during the election last year?"

"I ... er ... believe I may have been abroad," he said politely, with a nod at the cutting on the desk. Her face changed at once, expressing remorse.

"Oh, of course! I am so sorry, John. Naturally you would have been preoccupied. Well, then; it is only that Mr. Oswald simply *slithered* round the district, spreading loathsome insinuations and ill-natured gossip about Edgar—nay, absolute *lies*, though he took great care never to be caught out about them, the beast!"

"Er ... what sort of insinuations? Other than being loathsome, I mean."

"Hints meant to suggest that there was something ... corrupt"—her lips writhed delicately away from the word—"in the means by which

Edgar and his partners gained their contracts with the government. Which of course there was not!"

"Of course not," Grey said, but she was in full spate, eyes flashing magnificently in indignation.

"As though Oswald's own hands were clean, in that regard! Everyone knows that the man simply *battens* upon bribery! He is a perfect viper of depravity!"

"Indeed." Grey was undergoing a swift process of enlightenment, realizing belatedly that Oswald had clearly been Edgar's opponent in the recent election. Which explained very neatly the insinuations of sabotage directed at the DeVane consortium. A better way of removing any future political threat could scarcely be imagined.

Oswald's cleverness in the matter had been in leading Marchmont and Twelvetrees to make the accusations, virtuously avoiding any appearance of involvement himself. Yes, "snake" seemed reasonably accurate as a description.

"Who bribes him?" he asked.

There, though, Maude was at a loss, able only to repeat that everyone knew—but not precisely *what* everyone knew. Meaning that if Oswald did take bribes, he was reasonably circumspect about it. A word with Harry Quarry might shed a bit more light on the matter, though.

Invigorated by this thought, and the more eager to return to London, he smiled warmly upon Maude.

"Thank you, Maude, my dear," he said. "You are a blessing and a boon." Standing a-tiptoe, he kissed her startled cheek, then strode with great determination for the stables.

Part III



The Hero's Return

"Would you say that I appear haggard, Tom?" he inquired. There was a looking glass upon his dresser, but he found himself reluctant to employ it.

"Yes, me lord."

"Oh. Well, Colonel Quarry won't mind, I suppose. You know what to do?"

"Yes, me lord." Tom Byrd hesitated, looking at him narrowly. "You're sure as you'll be all right alone, me lord?"

"Certainly," he said, with what heartiness he could muster. He waved a hand in dismissal. "I'll be fine."

Byrd eyed him in patent disbelief.

"I'll summon you a coach, me lord," he said.

He resisted the suggestion for form's sake, in order not to alarm Tom, but once safely inside the coach, he sank gratefully into the dusty squabs, closing his eyes, and concentrated on breathing for the journey to the Beefsteak.

How many pawnshops might there be in Southwark? he wondered, as the coach rattled through the streets. Tom had made several careful copies of the list of Anne Thackeray's jewelry; he and his brothers would see whether any of the bits and bobs had been pawned.

He had a most uneasy feeling about Anne Thackeray, but hoped for her sister's sake that some trace of her could be found. He had gone himself to her last known address directly upon his return to London, but the landlady, a hard-faced bitch of a woman, had known nothing —or at least, nothing she would tell, even for a price.

He felt mildly feverish; after he'd seen Harry, perhaps he'd take a room at the Beefsteak for the night and go to bed. But he wanted to tell Quarry what he'd learned in Sussex, and set him on the trail of Mortimer Oswald. Granted, Maude DeVane was not an unbiased witness on the subject of the MP, but the way she had said, *Everyone knows*, so positive ... If Oswald did take bribes, it was more than

possible that Harry could find out. Harry's own half brother was Sir Richard Joffrey, an influential and canny politician who had survived a good many shifts in government over the course of the last fifteen years. No one did that without knowing where a few bodies were buried.

He paid the coach and turned to find the doorman holding open the Beefsteak's door, bowing with unusual respect.

"My lord!" the man said fervently.

"Are you quite all right, Mr. Dobbs?" he asked.

"Never better, sir," the man assured him, bowing him inside. "Colonel Quarry's a-waiting on you in the library, my lord."

His sense of unease grew as he passed through the hall. Mr. Bodley, the steward, stopped dead upon seeing him, eyes round, then vanished hurriedly into the dining room, presumably to fetch his tray.

He paused warily at the door to the library, but all seemed reassuringly as usual. Quarry's broad back was visible, bent over a table by the window. As Grey drew near, he saw that the table was covered with newspapers, one of which Harry Quarry was perusing, a look of absorption upon his face. At Grey's step, he looked up, his craggy face breaking into an ears-wide grin.

"Ho!" he said in greeting. "It's the man himself! A bumper of your best brandy, Mr. Bodley, if you please, for the Hero of Crefeld!" "Oh, *shit*!" said Grey.



In the end, he did spend the night at the Beefsteak, having been—despite his repeated protests, which went completely ignored by everyone—obliged to join in so many extravagant toasts in his honor that merely walking became problematic, let alone finding his way back to his quarters in the barracks.

An attempt at escape in the morning was frustrated by the baying hounds of Fleet Street, several of whom had got wind of his presence at the club and hovered outside, kept at bay by the indomitable Mr. Dobbs, who had survived being tomahawked by red Indians in America and thus was not intimidated by mere scribblers.

One of the most intransigent balladeers took up a station under the windows of the library and bellowed out a never-ending performance of a dramatic—and execrably rhymed—lay entitled "The Death of Tom Pilchard," to the general disedification of Mr. Wilbraham and the other inhabitants of the Hermit's Corner, all of whom glared at Grey, holding *him* responsible for the disturbance.

He escaped at last under cover of darkness, disguised in Mr. Dobbs's shabby greatcoat and laced hat, and made his way on foot through the streets, arriving hungry and exhausted—though finally sober—to find Tom Byrd and his elder brother Jack awaiting him impatiently at the barracks.

"I found it at a place called Markham's," Jack told him, displaying his find. "Pawned a month ago, by a lady. Young, the pawnbroker said, and summat of a pop-eyed look about her, though he didn't remember nothing else."

"It's hers, isn't it, me lord?" Tom chipped in anxiously.

Grey picked up the trinket—a cheap silver locket, inscribed with the letter "A." He compared it for form's sake to the sheet Barbara had given him, but there could be little doubt.

"Excellent!" he said. "You asked, of course, whether she had left an address."

Jack nodded.

"No joy there, my lord. The only thing ..." He glanced at his younger brother, who was, after all, Grey's valet, and thus had rights.

"The feller didn't want to sell it to us, me lord. He said he'd had other things from this lady, and there was a gent what would come by, asking particular for her things, and pay a very pretty price for 'em."

"Aye, sir," Jack said, nodding agreement. "I thought it wasn't but a ruse to get more, and wouldn't have paid, but Tom said as how we must. I hope that was all right?"

"Yes, of course." Grey waved that aside. "The man—did the pawnbroker remember him?"

"Oh, yes, me lord," Tom said. His hair was nearly standing on end with excitement at what he had to impart. "He remembered *him* well enough. Said it was a man what always wore a mask—a black silk mask."

Grey felt a surge of excitement equal to the Byrds'.

"Christ!" he said. "Fanshawe!"

Tom nodded.

"I thought it must be, me lord. Is he looking for Miss Thackeray, too, d'ye suppose?"

"I can't think what else he might intend—though surely he is not pursuing her with any great determination, if he has not yet discovered her lodgings."

"Perhaps he has," Jack Byrd suggested, "but he's not got up his nerve to see her, what with the face an' all—Tom told me what happened to him." Jack shuddered reflexively at the thought.

Grey glanced at the window, black night showing through the half-drawn curtains.

"Well, we can do little about it tonight. I will write a note, though—if you will take it in the morning, Jack?"

"What, to Sussex?" Jack looked slightly nonplussed. "Well, of course, my lord, if you like, but—"

"No, I think we needn't go that far," Grey assured him. "Plainly, Captain Fanshawe visits London regularly. He is a member at White's; leave the note there, to be delivered upon his arrival."

The two Byrds bowed, for an instant looking absurdly alike, though they did not really resemble each other closely.

"Very good, me lord," Tom said. "Will you have a bit of supper, then?"

Grey nodded and sat down to compose his note. He had just trimmed his quill when he became aware that neither Byrd had departed; both were standing on the opposite side of the room, viewing him with approval.

"What?" he said.

"Nothing, me lord," Tom said, smiling beneficently. "I was just telling Jack, you aren't looking quite so hag-rid as you was."

"You mean haggard?"

"That, neither."



Grey had finally fallen into an uneasy sleep, in which he hurried endlessly through stubbled fields with crows cawing overhead, sure that he must reach a distant red-brick building in order to prevent some unspeakable disaster, but never drawing closer.

One crow dived low, shrieking, and he ducked, covering his head, then sat up abruptly, realizing that the crow had said, "Wake up, me lord." "What?" he said blankly. He could not focus eyes or mind, but the terrible sense of urgency from his dream had not left him. "Who ... what?"

"There's a soldier come, me lord. I'd not have waked you, but he says it's a man's life."

His eyes finally consenting to operate, he saw Tom Byrd, round face worried but alight with interest, shaking out his banyan before a hastily poked-up fire.

"Yes. Of course. He ... did he ..." He groped simultaneously for words and bedclothes. "Name?"

"Yes, me lord. Captain Jones, he says."

Scrambling out of bed, Grey thrust his arms into the sleeves of his banyan, but did not wait for Tom to find his slippers, padding quick and barefoot through the cold to the darkened sitting room.

Jones was stirring up the fire, a black and burly demon whose silhouette was limned by sparks. He turned at Grey's entrance, dropping the poker with a crash upon the hearth.

"Where is he?" He reached as though to seize Grey's arm, but Grey stepped aside.

"Where is who?"

"Herbert Gormley, of course! What have you done with him?"

"Gormless?" Grey was so startled that the name popped out of him. "What's happened to him?"

Jones's clenched-fist expression, just visible by the glow of the fire, relaxed a trifle at that.

"Gormless? You call him that, too, do you?"

"Not to his face, certainly. Thank you, Tom." Byrd, hurrying in, had placed his slippers on the floor, eyeing Jones with marked wariness.

"What has happened?" Grey repeated, thrusting his cold feet into the slippers and noting absently that they were warm; Tom had taken time to hold them over the bedroom fire.

"He's disappeared, Major—and so has Tom Pilchard. And I want to know what you have to do with the matter."

He stared at Jones, unable for a moment to take this in. Still half in the grip of nightmare, his brain produced a vision of Herbert Gormley absconding by night, the remains of a massive cannon tucked tidily under one arm. He shook his head to clear it of this nonsense, and gestured Jones to the sofa.

"Sit. I assure you, sir, I have nothing 'to do' with the matter—but I certainly wish to know who does. Tell me what you know."

Jones's face worked briefly—Grey had the notion that he was grinding his teeth—but he nodded shortly and sat down, though he remained poised upon the edge of the sofa, hands on his knees, ready to leap up at a moment's notice.

"He's gone—Herbert. When I found the cannon gone, I went to find him, ask what—but he was nowhere to be found. I've been searching for him since the day before yesterday. Do you know where he is?"

Tom had been building up the fire; the flame was high enough now to show Jones's heavy face, hollowed by worry and pouched with fatigue.

"No. You know where he lives?" Grey sat down himself, and scrubbed a hand over his face in an effort to rouse himself completely.

Jones nodded, massive fists clenching and unclenching unconsciously upon his thighs.

"He's not been home in two days. The last anyone saw of him was Wednesday evening, when he left the laboratory. You're quite sure he's not been here?" Dark eyes flicked suspiciously at Grey.

"You are entirely welcome to search the place." Grey waved a hand toward the room and the door through which Tom Byrd had disappeared, presumably toward the barracks kitchen in search of refreshment. "Why the devil would he come here?"

"For that bit of shrapnel."

For a moment, Grey looked blank; then memory returned. His hand rose involuntarily toward his chest, but he altered the motion, pretending instead to stifle a yawn.

"The bit of iron from Tom Pilchard? The leopard's head? What on earth would he—or you—want it for?"

Jones measured him for a long moment before replying, but answered at last, reluctant.

"With the cannon gone, that may be the only evidence."

"Evidence of *what*, for God's sake? And what do you mean, the cannon's gone?" he added, belatedly realizing that he had overlooked the other bit of Jones's statement. "Who in Christ's name would steal a burst cannon?"

"It wasn't stolen," Jones answered shortly. "The foundrymen took it—and the others. It's been melted down."

This seemed an entirely reasonable thing to do, and Grey said as much, causing Jones's face to work again. He was grinding his teeth; Grey could hear it.

Jones abruptly shut his eyes, upper lip folded under his lower teeth

in a way that reminded Grey of his cousin Olivia's bulldog, Alfred. It was an amiable animal, but remarkably stubborn.

The chiming clock on the mantelpiece struck the hour: two o'clock. The captain was likely telling the truth about searching everywhere else before coming to Grey's door.

Jones at length opened his eyes—they were bloodshot, enhancing the resemblance to Alfred—though the teeth remained fixed in his lip. At last he shook his head in resignation and sighed.

"I'll have to trust you, I suppose," he said.

"I am distinctly honored," Grey said, with an edge. "Thank you, Tom."

Byrd had reappeared with a tray hastily furnished with two cups of tea. The tea was stewed and black, undoubtedly from the urn kept for the night watch, but served in Grey's decent vine-patterned china. He took a cup gratefully, adding a substantial dollop of brandy from the decanter.

Jones stared at the cup of tea in his own hand, as though wondering where it had come from, but essayed a cautious sip, then coughed and rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth.

"The cannon. Herbert said he thought you knew nothing about the process of gun-founding; is that true?"

"Nothing more than he told me himself." The hot tea and brandy were both comfort and stimulant; Grey began to feel more alert. "Why?"

Jones blew out his breath, making a small cloud of steam; the air in the sitting room was still chilly.

"Without describing the entire process to you—you *do* know that the bronze of a cannon is an alloy, produced by—"

"Yes, I do know that." Grey was sufficiently awake by now as to be annoyed. "What does that—"

"I am sure that the burst cannon—all of them—had been cast from an inferior alloy, one lacking the proper proportion of copper." He stared meaningfully at Grey, obviously expecting him to drop his tea, clutch his head, or otherwise exhibit signs of horrified comprehension.

"Oh?" Grey said, and reached for the brandy again.

Jones heaved a sigh that went all the way to his feet, and put out a hand for the decanter in turn.

"Not to put too fine a point upon the matter, Major," he said, eyes on the amber stream splashing into his tea, "I am a spy."

Grey narrowly prevented himself saying, "Oh?" again, and instead

said, "For the French? Or the Austrians?" Tom Byrd, who had been loitering respectfully in the background, stiffened, then bent casually to pick up the poker from the hearth.

"Neither, for God's sake," Jones said crossly. "I am in the employ of His Majesty's government."

"Well, who the bloody hell are you spying *on*, then?" Grey said, losing patience.

"The Arsenal," Jones replied, looking surprised, as though this should be obvious. "Or rather, the foundry."

There ensued a tedious ten minutes of extraction which brought Grey to the point of wishing to gnash his own teeth. At the end of it, though, he had managed to get Jones to admit—with extreme reluctance—that he was not in fact employed by the Arsenal, as Grey had assumed. He was a genuine captain in the Royal Artillery Regiment, though, and as such had been sent to nose unofficially about the Arsenal and see what he could discover regarding the matter of the exploding cannons—the Royal Artillery having an interest, as Grey might suppose.

"Couldn't be official, d'ye see," Jones said, becoming more confidential. "The Royal Commission had already been appointed, and it's their show, so to speak."

Grey nodded, curious. Twelvetrees, who was a member of the Commission of Inquiry, belonged to the Royal Artillery; why ought the regiment be sending Jones to do surreptitiously what Twelvetrees was doing so overtly? Unless ... unless someone suspected Twelvetrees of something?

"To whom do you report your findings?" Grey asked. Jones began again to look shifty, and a small premonitory prickle ran suddenly down Grey's spine.

Jones's lips worked in and out in indecision, but at last he bit the bullet and blurted, "A man named Bowles."

As though cued by an invisible prompter, the teacup began to rattle gently in its saucer. Grey felt a monstrous sense of irritation; was he never going to be allowed to drink a full cup of tea in peace, for God's sake? Very carefully, he set down the cup and saucer, and wiped his hands upon the skirts of his dressing gown.

"Oh, you know him, do you?" Jones's red-rimmed eyes fixed on Grey, suddenly alert.

"I know of him." Grey did not wish to admit to his relations with Bowles, let alone discuss them. He had met the mysterious Mr. Bowles once, and had no wish to repeat the experience.

"So you had no official standing at the laboratory?"

"No, that's why I needed Gormley."

Herbert Gormley had no great authority within the hierarchy of the Ordnance Office, but he had the necessary knowledge to locate the remains of the exploded cannon, and sufficient administrative skill to have them quietly brought to the guns' graveyard near the proving grounds and sequestered there for autopsy.

"There are hundreds of broken guns there; they should have been safe!" Jones's teeth were clenched in frustration; in hopes of preventing further damage to the man's molars, Grey poured more brandy into his empty cup.

Jones gulped it and set down the cup, eyes watering.

"But they weren't," he said hoarsely. "They're gone. There were eight of them under my investigation—all gone. But *only* those eight—the ones Gormley found for me. Everything else is still there. And now Gormley's gone, too. You can't tell me that's coincidence, Major!"

Grey had no intention of doing so.

"You do not suppose that Gormless—Gormley—had anything to do with the removal of the exploded cannon?"

Jones shook his head violently.

"Not a chance. No, he's onto me. Has to be."

"He? Whom do you mean?"

"I don't fucking *know*!" Jones's hands clenched together in an unconscious pantomime of neck-wringing. "Not for sure. But I'll get him," he added, giving Grey a fierce look, with a glimpse of clenched, bared fang. "If he's harmed poor little Herbert, I'll—I'll—"

The man would be toothless before he was forty, Grey thought.

"We will find Mr. Gormley," he said firmly. "But wherever he is, I doubt that we can discover him before daylight. Compose yourself, Captain, if you please—and then tell me the goddamn truth about what's going on at the Arsenal."

The truth, once extracted and divested of its encrustations of laborious speculation and deductive dead ends, was relatively simple: Gormley and Jones had concluded, on the basis of close examination, that someone at the foundry was abstracting a good part of the copper meant to be used in the alloy for casting. Result being that while new cannon cast with this alloy looked quite as usual, the metal was more brittle than it should be, thus liable to sudden failure under sustained fire.

"Those marks you noticed on Tom Pilchard," Jones said, describing a series of semicircles in the air with a blunt forefinger. "Those are the marks where holes left in the casting have been plugged later, then sanded flat and burnished over. You might get a hole or two in any casting—completely normal—but if the alloy's wanting, you'll get a lot more."

"And a much higher chance of the metal's fracturing where you have several holes together, such as those I saw. Quite."

He did. He saw himself and four other men, standing no more than a foot away from a cannon riddled like a cheese with invisible holes, each charge rammed down its smoking barrel one more throw of crooked dice. Grey was beginning to have a metallic taste in the back of his mouth. Rather than lift the cup and saucer again, he simply picked up the decanter and drank from it, holding it round the neck.

"Whoever is taking the copper—they're selling it, of course?" Copper was largely imported, and valuable.

"Yes, but I haven't been able to trace any of it," Jones admitted, moodily. "The damn stuff hasn't any identifying marks. And with the Dockyards so handy ... might be going anywhere. To the Dutch, the French—maybe to someone private, the East India Company perhaps —wouldn't put it past the bastards." He glanced at the window, where a slice of night still showed black between the heavy curtains, and sighed.

"We will find him," Grey repeated, more gently, though he was himself by no means so sure of it. He coughed, and drank again.

"If you are correct—if copper has been abstracted—then surely whoever is responsible for the casting would know of it?"

"Howard Stoughton," Jones said bleakly. "The Master Founder. Yes, most likely. I've been watching him for weeks, though, and he's not put a foot wrong. No hint of any secret meetings with foreign agents; he scarcely leaves the foundry, and when he does, he goes home and stays there. But if it is the copper, and it is him, and Gormley's found some proof ..."

Another thought occurred to Grey, and he felt obliged to put it, despite the risk to Jones's tooth enamel.

"We have two assumptions here, Captain, do we not? Firstly, that you and Mr. Gormley are correct in your assessment of the cause of the cannons' failure. And secondly, that Mr. Gormley is missing because he has discovered who is responsible for the abstraction of copper from the Arsenal and been removed in consequence. But these

are assumptions only, for the moment.

"Have you considered the alternative possibility," he said, taking a firmer hold of the brandy bottle in case he should require a weapon, "that Mr. Gormley might himself have been involved in the matter?"

Jones's inflamed eyes swiveled slowly in Grey's direction, bulging slightly, and the muscles of his neck bunched. Before he could speak, though, a discreet cough came from the vicinity of the hearth.

"Me lord?" Tom Byrd, who had been listening raptly, poker in hand, now set it down and stepped diffidently forward.

"Yes, Tom?"

"Beg pardon, me lord. Only as I was in the Lark's Nest Wednesday—having stopped for a bite on my way back from the Arsenal, see—and the place was a-buzz, riled like it was a hornets' nest, rather than a lark's. Was a press gang going through the neighborhood, they said; took up two men was regulars, and there was talk about would they maybe go and try to get them back—but you could see there wasn't nothing in it but talk. They warned me to go careful when I left, though."

The young valet hesitated, looking from one gentleman to another.

"I think they maybe got him, this Gormley."

"A press gang?" Jones said, his scowl diminishing only slightly. "Well, it's a thought, but—"

"Begging your pardon, sir, it's maybe summat more than a thought. I saw them."

Grey's heart began to beat faster.

"The press gang?"

Tom turned a freckled, earnest face in his employer's direction.

"Yes, sir. 'Twas a heavy fog comin' in from the river, and so I heard them coming down the street afore they saw me, and ducked rabbity into an alleyway and hid behind a pile of rubbish. But they passed me by close, sir, and I did see 'em; six sailors and four men they'd seized, all roped together."

He hesitated, frowning.

"It was foggy, sir. And I ain't—haven't—seen him before. But it was right near the Arsenal, and that what you called him—Gormless. It's only—would he maybe be a dark, small, clever-looking cove, with a pretty face like a girl's and dressed like a clerk?"

"He would," Grey said, ignoring Jones, who had made a sound like a stuck pig. "Could you see anything to tell which ship they came from?" Tom Byrd shook his head.

"No, sir. They was real sailors, though, the way they talked." Jones stared at him.

"Why wouldn't they be real sailors? What do you mean, boy?"

"Mr. Byrd has a somewhat suspicious mind," Grey intervened tactfully, seeing Tom flush with indignation. "A most valuable attribute, on occasion. On the present occasion, I presume that he means only that your initial supposition was that Mr. Gormley had been abducted by the person or persons responsible for the removal of copper from the foundry, but apparently that is not the case. By the way," he added, struck by a thought, "have you any indication that copper *is* missing from the foundry? That would be evidence in support of your theory."

"Yes," Jones said, a small measure of satisfaction lightening the anxiety in his face. "We have got that, by God. When I reported our suspicions about the copper, Mr. Bowles undertook to introduce another of his subordinates, a man named Stapleton, into the foundry in the capacity of clerk and set him to inspect the accounts and inventory on the quiet. A good man, Stapleton," he added with approval. "Got the information in less than a week."

"Splendid," Grey said, and took a searingly large swallow of brandy. The hairs rose on his body at the mention of Neil Stapleton. Neil of the hot blue eyes ... and even more incendiary attributes. Known to his intimates—if not necessarily his friends—as Neil the Cunt.

He'd met Stapleton twice: initially, at a very private club called Lavender House, in such circumstances as to leave no doubt of either's private inclinations. And again when Grey had ruthlessly threatened to expose those inclinations to Hubert Bowles, in order to force Stapleton to obtain urgent information for him. Christ, how close had he come to meeting the man again? He shoved that thought hastily away and took another drink.

Jones was showing signs of impatience, tapping his feet back and forth in a soundless tattoo upon the carpet.

"It's got to be a ship anchored by the Dockyards. Soon as it's light, I'm going through them like a dose of salts, and then we'll be to the bottom of this!"

"I wish you the best of luck," Grey said politely. "And I do hope that the gentleman Tom saw in the custody of the press gang was Mr. Gormley. However—if he was, does this not rather obviate your conclusion that he was in possession of incriminating information

regarding the perpetrator?"

Jones gave him a glassy look, and Tom Byrd looked reproving.

"Now, me lord, you know you oughtn't talk like that at this hour of the morning. You got to pardon his lordship, sir," he said apologetically to Jones. "His father—the duke, you know—had him schooled in logic. He can't really help it, like."

Jones shook his head like a swimmer emerging from heavy surf, and reached wordlessly for the brandy, which Grey surrendered with a brief gesture of apology.

"I mean," he amended, "if Gormley's been taken by a press gang, it might be simple misfortune. It needn't have anything to do with your inquiries."

Jones pressed his lips together, looking displeased.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. But the first thing is to get Gormley back. Agreed?"

"Certainly," Grey said, wondering privately just how complex a matter it might prove to pry a new seaman—no matter how unwillingly recruited—from the rapacious grasp of the navy.

Jones nodded, satisfied, and glanced at the clock. A few minutes until three; the sun would not be up for several hours yet. Tom Byrd yawned suddenly, and Grey felt his own jaw muscles creak in sympathy.

All conversation seemed to have ceased abruptly; there was nothing more to say, and they sat for some moments in silence. There were sounds from the distant barracks and the murmur of the fire, but these were muted, unreal. The night hung over them, heavy with possibilities—most of them threatening.

Grey began to be conscious of his heartbeat, and just behind each beat, a slight, sharp pain in his chest.

"I'm going to bed," he said abruptly, gathering his feet under him. "Tom, will you find Captain Jones somewhere to sleep?"

Disregarding the captain's muttered reply that he needn't bother, wouldn't sleep anyway, he stood and turned for the door, his brandy-clouded vision smearing light and shadow. Just short of the door, though, one final question occurred to him.

"Captain—you are positive that all the explosions are the result of weakened alloy, are you?" Grey asked, swinging round. "No evidence of deliberate sabotage—as, for instance, by the provision of bombs packed with a higher grade of powder than they should be?"

Jones blinked at him, owl-eyed.

"Why, yes," he said slowly. "In fact, there is. That's what began the investigation; the Ordnance Office discovered two grapeshot cartridges packed with a great deal more powder than they should have been, and fine-ground, too—you know that's unstable, yes? But very explosive. Bombs, they were."

Grey nodded, his hands curving in unconscious memory of the shape and the weight of the grapeshot cartridges he had handled at Crefeld, tossing them in careless hurry, as though they had been harmless as stones.

"This was just as they began to be aware of the destruction of the cannon," Jones said, shrugging, "and so they convened the Commission of Inquiry."

Dry-mouthed, Grey licked his lips.

"How did they discover this?"

"Testing on the proving grounds. Came near to killing one of the proving crew. Gormley was almost sure that it had nothing to do with the cannons' fracturing, though."

"Almost?" Grey echoed, with a skeptical intonation.

"He could prove it was the alloy, he said. He could assay the metal from the ruined cannon, and prove that it lacked the proper mix of copper. He couldn't do it openly, though; he had to wait on an opportunity to use the laboratory's facilities secretly."

Jones's throat worked, whether with anger or grief, Grey couldn't tell. He swallowed his emotion, though, and went on.

"But they took the cannon before he could make his tests. That's why I was sure at first that he'd come to you, Major," he added, fixing Grey with a gimlet eye.

"That bit of shrapnel you took away is the only metal from an exploded cannon that hasn't been melted down and lost. It's the only bit of proof that's left. You will take care of it, won't you?"



"What do you mean, there are no press gangs operating near the Arsenal?"

Grey thought Jones would explode like a milling shed, walls and roof flying every which way. His heavy face quivered with rage, eyes bulging as he loomed over the diminutive harbormaster of the Royal Dockyards.

The harbormaster, accustomed to dealing with volatile sea captains, was unmoved.

"Putting aside the matter of courtesy—the navy would not normally so intrude upon the operations of another service—" he said mildly, "there are no ships outfitting in the yards just at present. If they are not outfitting, they do not require additional crew. If they do not require seamen, plainly the captains do not send out press gangs to acquire them. *Quod erat demonstrandum*," he added, obviously considering this the *coup de grâce*.

The captain seemed disposed to argue the point—or to assault the harbormaster. Feeling that this would be counter to their best interests, Grey seized him by the arm and propelled him out of the office.

"That whoreson is lying to us!"

"Possibly," Grey said, urging Jones down the length of the dock by main force. "But possibly not. Come, let us see whether Tom has discovered anything."

Whether ships were outfitting in the yards or not, ships were most assuredly being built and repaired there. The ribs and keelson of a large ship rose like a whale's skeleton on one side, while on the other, a newly completed keel lay in the channel, swarms of men covering it like ants, laying deck in a racket of hammers and curses.

The shipyard was littered with timbers, planking, rolls of copper, hogsheads of nails, barrels of tar, coils of rope, heaps of sawdust, mallets, saws, drawknives, planes, and all the other bewildering impedimenta of shipbuilding. Men were everywhere; England was at war, and the dockyards buzzed like a hive.

Out in the river, small craft plied to and fro, sails white against the brown of the Thames and the dark shapes of the prison hulks anchored in the distance. Two larger ships lay at anchor, though, and these were the focus of Grey's attention.

Not sure precisely where Tom Byrd might be, he took Jones firmly by the arm and sauntered to and fro, whistling "Lilibulero." Passing workmen spared them a glance now and then, but the docks were thick with tradesmen and uniforms; they were not conspicuous.

Eventually his valet stepped cautiously out from behind a large heap of timbers, a small brass spyglass in hand.

"Yes, me lord?"

"For God's sake, put that away, Tom, or you'll be taken up as a

French spy. I'd have the devil of a time getting you out of a naval prison."

Seeing that his employer was not joking, Tom tucked the spyglass hastily inside his jacket.

"Have you seen anyone familiar?"

"Well, I can't be sure, me lord, but I *think* I've maybe spotted a cove as was one of the press gang I saw."

"Where?" Jones's eyebrows bristled, eyes gleaming beneath them with readiness to strangle someone.

Byrd nodded toward the water.

"He was a-going out to one o' the big ships, sir. That un." He nodded toward the vessel on the left, a three-masted thing with its canvas furled. "Maybe half an hour gone; I've not seen him come back."

Grey stood for a moment, gazing at the ships. He had vivid memories of his last venture on the high seas, and thus a marked disinclination to set foot on board a ship again. On the other hand, his involuntary voyage had been at the hands of the East India Company, and it did not appear that either of the ships presently at anchor intended any immediate departure.

Jones quivered at his side, like a hunting dog scenting pheasant on the wind.

"All right," Grey said, resigned. "No help for it, I suppose. Stick close, though, Tom. I don't want to see *you* pressed."



"Him, me lord." Tom Byrd spoke under his breath, with the barest of nods toward a man who stood with his back to them, shouting something up into the rigging. "I'm sure."

"All right. See if you can find out who he is, without making too much of a stir. I think we'll have time."

Turning his back, Grey strolled nonchalantly to the rail, where he stood looking toward the Woolwich shore. The Arsenal was no more than a splotch of dark buildings at this distance, set amid the ruffled acres of its proving grounds. Below, he could hear the sounds of Jones's impromptu search party.

Captain Hanson of the Sunrise had been surprised, to say the least,

by their sudden appearance, and had reiterated the harbormaster's statement about press gangs. Still, he was not harried at present, was a young and naturally amiable man—and was acquainted with Grey's brother. He had therefore graciously invited Jones to search the ship if he liked—in case his Mister Gormley had somehow smuggled himself aboard—accompanied by the third lieutenant and two or three able seamen to open or lift anything he would like to look into or under.

It was apparent from this that there was nothing suspicious to be found aboard, but Jones had had little choice but to conduct his search, leaving Grey to converse with the captain—and Tom to circle warily about the decks, in hopes of spotting the man he had seen in the fog.

Captain Hanson had after a short time excused himself, offering Grey the use of his cabin—an offer Grey had politely declined, saying that he would prefer to take the air on deck until his friend was at liberty.

He turned his back to the rail, glancing casually over the deck. The man Tom had picked out was certainly one who invited recognition; he bore a strong resemblance to a Barbary ape, that part of his hair not tarred into a pigtail standing up in a ginger crest on his head.

He seemed also to be in a position of some authority; at the moment, he had one foot resting on a barrel, an elbow resting on the raised knee, and his chin upon the palm of his hand, squinting quizzically at something—the cut of the jib? The lie of the bilge? Grey knew nothing of nautical terms.

It wouldn't do to stare; he turned back to the shore, noting as he did so Tom, in cordial conversation with a young sailor near the back—well, aft, he did know that much—of the ship.

What next? He was sure that Jones would not find Gormley aboard the *Sunrise*. He supposed they would have to go and search the other ship, as well. He'd seen men shouting to and fro between the ships—the other lay not more than a few hundred yards away; doubtless the Barbary ape could have taken Gormley there without difficulty—though he had no idea why he should have done so.

The ape—Grey glanced covertly at the man again—was plainly part of the crew of the *Sunrise*. And yet Captain Hanson had said unequivocally that he had sent out no press gangs. Ergo, if Tom were correct in his identification—and a face like that one would be memorable, coming out of the fog—the ape had been conducting

some private enterprise of his own.

Now, that was an interesting notion. And if they failed to find any trace of Gormley on the other ship, it might be worth having Tom brought face to face with both Captain Hanson and the ape, to tell his story. Grey supposed that any captain worth his salt would be interested to know if his crew were conducting a clandestine trade in bodies.

The thought gave him a faint chill. Christ, what if it *were* bodies? The ape and his cohorts might be augmenting their pay by dealing as resurrection men, providing cadavers to the dissection rooms.

No. He dismissed the grisly vision of a dead and eviscerated Gormless as both too dramatic and too complicated to be true. Back to Occam, then. Given multiple alternatives, the simplest explanation is most likely to be true. And the simplest explanation for the disappearance of Herbert Gormley was, firstly, that Tom had seen the Barbary ape but had *not* seen Gormley, being mistaken in his identification. Or secondly—and equally likely, he thought, knowing Tom—that his valet *had* seen them both, and the ape had done something unaccountable with his captives.

They were presently operating under the second assumption, but perhaps that had been reckless of him. If ...

All thought was momentarily suspended, his eye caught by a small boat halfway out from the shore. Or, rather, by the glint of sunlight on yellow hair. Grey uttered an oath which caused the sailor nearest him to drop his jaw, and leaned out over the rail, trying for a better look.

"He's called Appledore," said a voice in his ear, startling him.

"Who's called Appledore?"

"Him what we're watching, me lord—he's a bosun's mate, they say. *And*"—Tom swelled a bit with excited importance—"he was ashore Wednesday, and came back to the ship at ... well, I don't quite know, the peculiar way they have of telling time on ships, all bells and watches and such, but it was late."

"Excellent," he said, scarcely listening. "Tom, give me your spyglass."

He clapped the instrument to his eye, catching wild swathes of river, sky, and clouds, until suddenly he brought the boat in view, its contents sharp and clear. There were two men in the boat. One of them was unfamiliar, a heavyset fellow muffled in a coat and cocked hat, a portmanteau at his feet. The man rowing in his shirtsleeves, though, yellow hair a-flutter in the wind, was Neil the Cunt. Which almost certainly meant that the other gentleman must be Howard Stoughton, master founder of the Royal Brass Foundry.

The small boat was not making for either of the two large ships, but steering a course a little way to the south. Following the direction of its bow, he saw a small, brisk-looking craft tacking slowly to and fro.

"Stay here." Grey thrust the spyglass back into Tom's hands. "See that small boat, with two men? Don't take your eyes off it!"

"Where you going, me lord?" Tom, startled, was trying to look at his employer and through the glass at the same time, but Grey was already halfway to the door that led below.

"To organize a boarding party!" he called over his shoulder, and plunged without hesitation into the bowels of the *Sunrise*.



The captain's gig hurtled over the river's chop, propelled by half a dozen burly sailors. The captain himself had come; Grey was shouting further explanation into his ear, clinging with one hand to the side of the boat, with the other to the impressive-looking cutlass the mate had shoved into his hand.

Tom Byrd and Captain Jones were likewise armed. Tom looked thrilled, Jones grimly dangerous.

The small boat was moving much more slowly, but had a substantial lead. It would undoubtedly reach the brig—Hanson said it was a brig—before they did, but that would not matter, so long as they were in time to prevent the brig's fleeing downriver.

As they drew closer, he saw Neil Stapleton turn a startled face toward them, then turn back, redoubling his efforts at the oars.

For an instant, he wondered whether Stapleton was indeed Bowles's man. But, no—he had caught a crab, as the sailors said, one oar skimming the surface and slewing his boat half round. Clever enough to look accidental, but slowing the smaller craft, while the gig cleaved the waters to the bosun's bark.

Hanson was kneeling, gripping Grey's shoulder to avoid being thrown from the boat, roaring something at the men on board the brig. They looked surprised, glancing from the oncoming gig to the smaller boat, struggling to reach them. The small boat thumped the side of the brig; Grey heard it, and the cries of outrage from the men on deck. The impact had knocked the heavyset man into the bottom of the boat; he rose, cursing, and reached up, scrambling awkwardly over the rail of the brig, half-tumbling into the arms of the waiting sailors.

He gained his feet and turned back, reaching urgently over the rail for his portmanteau. But Stapleton had dug his oars and was pulling rapidly away, coming fast toward the gig.

"'Vast rowing!" bellowed the bosun, and the crew of the gig shipped oars as one, letting the long, sleek boat glide up beside the smaller one. Hands reached out to grab the sides, and Stapleton let go his oars.

His face was scarlet with exertion and excitement, blue eyes bright as candle flames. Grey spared the space of one deep breath to admire his beauty, then grabbed him by the arm and yanked him head over arse into the gig.

"Is it Stoughton?" Jones was yelling. Grey barely heard him above the bellowing to and fro of Hanson and the men on the deck of the brig above.

Stapleton was on hands and knees, gasping for breath, his face nearly in Grey's lap, but managed to look up and nod. Other hands were grappling across the portmanteau; it fell with a thud into the bottom of the gig, and Jones lunged for it.

"Come on!" Hanson shouted. He was already reaching for the hands of the sailors on the brig. Grey rose, lurching to keep his footing, was seized by several helpful pairs of hands and virtually thrown aboard the brig. He seized the rail to keep from falling back, and over his shoulder saw Stapleton's grinning face below.

He sketched a salute, then turned to deal with the matter at hand.



"What do you mean, it's a naval vessel?" Jones looked disbelieving. "This?"

The captain of the *Ronson*, for so the small and elderly brig was named, looked displeased. He was very young, but conscious of the dignity of his service, his ship, and himself.

"We are one of His Majesty's ships," he said stiffly. "You are under

the jurisdiction of the navy, Captain. And you will not take this man."

The man, Stoughton, drew breath at this, and left off looking quite so terrified.

"He's right, you know." Captain Hanson, crammed into the tiny cabin with Grey, Jones, and Stoughton, had been listening to all the arguments and counterarguments, an expression of bemused absorption on his face. "His authority on his own vessel is absolute—save a senior naval officer should come aboard."

"Well, bloody hell! Are you not a senior officer, then?" Jones cried. His eyes were bloodshot, he was soaked with river water, and his hair was standing on end.

"Well, yes," Hanson said mildly. "But the gentleman who wrote that letter is a good deal more senior still." He nodded at the open letter on the desk, the sheet of paper that Stoughton had been carrying in his bosom.

It was crumpled and damp, but clearly legible. It was signed by a vice-admiral, and it gave one Howard Stoughton safe passage upon any of His Majesty's ships.

"But the man is a fucking traitor!" Jones was still holding his cutlass. He tightened his fist upon it and glared at the hapless Stoughton, who recoiled a little but stood his ground.

"I am not!" he said, sticking out his chin. " 'Twasn't treason, whatever else you like to call it."

The two sea captains glanced at each other, and Grey felt something unseen pass between them.

"A word with you, sir?" Hanson asked politely. "If you will perhaps excuse us, gentlemen ..."

Grey and Jones were obliged to leave, the *Ronson*'s mate escorting them up on deck and out of earshot.

"I don't frigging believe it. How can he ..."

Grey wasn't listening. He went to the rail and leaned over, to see Stapleton engaged in argument with the gig's bosun, apparently over the portmanteau. The bosun had the case between his feet, and appeared to be resisting Stapleton's efforts to open it.

"What do you think is in there, Mr. Stapleton?" he called.

Neil looked up, face still flushed, and Grey caught the gleam of his teeth as he shouted back.

"Gold," he said. "Maybe papers. Maybe a name. I hope so."

Grey nodded, then caught the bosun's eye.

"Don't let him open it," he called, and turned away. Occam's razor

said Stoughton had acted alone—all other things being equal. But someone had exerted considerable force upon the navy to produce that letter. And he did not think Stoughton possessed anything like that sort of influence.

Grey smelt a rat; a large one.

If he *hadn't* acted alone, Grey wanted the name of his confederate. And he had no faith at all that that name would ever come to light, once Hubert Bowles got his hands on it. Particularly not if that name had anything to do with His Majesty's navy.

The sound of the cabin door opening presaged the appearance on deck of Captain Hanson, who jerked his chin to summon Grey aside. He looked bemused.

"Right," he said. "I have thirty seconds, and this is between you and me. He is who you think he is, and he's done what you think he's done—and he's going to France in the *Ronson*. I'm sorry."

Grey took a long, deep breath, and wiped a flying strand of hair out of his face.

"I see," he said, calmly under the circumstances. "He sold the copper to the navy."

Hanson had the grace to look embarrassed.

"It is wartime," he said. "The lives of our men—"

"Is the life of a sailor worth more than that of a soldier?"

Hanson's lips set in a grimace, but he didn't reply.

Grey realized that his nails were cutting into the palms of his hands, and consciously unclenched his fists, breathing. Hanson was stirring, preparing to go.

"One thing," Grey said, holding Hanson's eye.

The captain made a brief motion of the head, not quite agreement, but willingness to listen.

"One minute alone with that portmanteau. The price of the gunners' lives."

Hanson's jaw worked for a moment.

"Not alone," he said finally. "With me."

"Done," said Grey.



It was nearly sunset when he emerged from Captain Hanson's cabin.

Jones was sitting on a gun case by the rail. He had passed the point of apoplexy long since, and merely regarded Grey with a suspicious, bloodshot eye.

"Got it, did you?" he said.

Grey nodded.

"And you aren't going to tell me, are you?" Jones sounded bitter, but resigned.

Grey reached into his pocket, brought out the small lump of the leopard's head, cold and hard, and dropped it into Jones's open palm.

"You have the proof you sought. You and Gormley were right; the cannons failed because of lack of copper, and it was Stoughton who stole it. You will make your report to that effect—and before you give it to your colonel in the Royal Artillery Regiment and to Bowles, you will send a copy to the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the explosion of the cannon Tom Pilchard."

Seeing Jones's brow knit, he hardened his voice.

"That, Captain, is an order from a superior officer. Assuming you would prefer that your colonel continues in ignorance of your association with Mr. Bowles, I suggest you follow it."

Jones made a small rumbling noise in his throat, but nodded reluctantly.

"Yes, all right. But that the bugger should escape altogether ... and now you're going to let the other bugger escape, too, aren't you? The man who brokered this infernal transaction? I tell you, Major, it drives me mad!"

"I don't blame you." Grey sat down beside him, suddenly exhausted. "War may be a brutal occupation, but politics is far more so."

They sat in silence for a moment, watching the sailors. Appledore was bellowing for the gig to be brought alongside. Hearing this, Jones sat bolt upright once more.

"But poor little Herbert Gormley—what of him? Tell me at least that you made Stoughton tell you what he did with Gormley! Is he dead?"

Fatigue of a not unpleasant sort blanketed Grey's limbs. He was tired, but not drained. And what was another hour or two, between him and the delightful prospect of supper and bed? The London end of the business could wait until tomorrow.

"No, he's in the hulks," Grey said, nodding upriver at the distant prison ships. "We're going to go and get him now."



"The navy was in it up to their necks!" Quarry said. "Goddamned bloody sods!"

Grey had seldom seen Quarry so angry. The scar on his cheek stood out white and the eye on that side was pulled nearly shut.

"Not all of them." He rubbed a hand across his face, still surprised to find it smooth. He felt seedy and grimy—but Tom Byrd had insisted upon shaving him before letting him go to the Beefsteak.

"Hanson didn't know; if he had, he would never have agreed to board the *Ronson*. And he was very angry at discovering that his bosun's mate—that was Appledore, the apelike fellow I told you of—was involved in such adventures without his knowledge. Had it not been for his indignation at being so practiced upon—his authority usurped without his knowledge or consent—I doubt he would have told me anything. As it was ..."

As it was, the matter had become clear to Grey sometime before Hanson himself had realized the degree of the navy's involvement. For Appledore to have abducted Gormley—taking all the men he could find who matched Gormley's description—obviously at Stoughton's instigation, but without the knowledge of his own captain ...

"That argued the existence of someone *in* the navy, involved in the matter, whose authority superseded Hanson's. And when I saw the letter from the ... gentleman of whom we spoke—" They were alone in the Beefsteak's smoking room, but there were people in the hallway, and discretion forbade his speaking the vice-admiral's name aloud in any case.

"'Gentleman.' Pfaugh!" Quarry made as though to spit on the floor, but caught the eye of the steward coming in with brandy, and refrained. "Scuttling sewer rat," he muttered, instead.

"A bilge rat, surely, Harry?" Grey took the brandy glass from Mr. Bodley's tray with a nod of thanks, and waited until the steward had departed before continuing.

"Rat or no, such a highly placed gentleman wouldn't risk any direct association with Stoughton. The only such indication is that letter of immunity—and that was worded in such a way as to give no proof of anything. In fact, had Stoughton not reached the *Ronson*—damn

Stapleton, for not contriving some means of stopping him in time!— the letter would have been valueless. It offered him nothing but safe passage, and if the matter became public, that could be dismissed as a simple courtesy to the Arsenal, allowing him to travel easily as his official business might demand."

Quarry huffed into his drink, but gave a grudging nod.

"Aye, I see. And so you concluded rightly that there was a third rotten apple in that barrel—someone who stood between Stoughton and our elevated bilge rat."

Grey nodded in turn, closing his eyes involuntarily at the pleasing burn of the liquor on his palate.

"Yes, and that consideration in turn focused my attention on the members of the commission. For it must be someone who had regular business with the Arsenal—and thus could consult with Stoughton without arousing suspicion. And likewise, it must be someone for whom consorting with a vice-admiral also would cause no remark.

"Beyond that," he said, licking a sticky drop from his lower lip, "the assumption that one of those three was involved in this matter would have explained their notably uncharitable behavior toward me in the course of the inquiry. Pinning responsibility for the death of Tom Pilchard to my coat would deflect any inquiry into other possible causes, and prevent the explosion being linked with the destruction of the other cannon, as well as having the salutary effect of discrediting one or both of my brothers. And any one of those three men could easily have influenced the other two, so as to guide the questioning as he desired."

"Hmph." Quarry frowned at the amber liquid in his glass, drank it off as though it were water, and set the glass aside. "Well, if discrediting Melton were the principal motive of our wicked bugger, it would be Twelvetrees. Bad blood, there. I shouldn't be surprised if it comes to pistols at dawn between him and Melton, one of these days."

"True," Grey agreed. "And Hal would shoot him like a dog, with pleasure. But it *wasn't* the principal motive. Twelvetrees is a sod, but an honorable sod. He's not merely a soldier, nor yet a colonel—he's a colonel of the Royal Artillery."

Quarry nodded, purse-lipped, taking the point. "Aye. Rob the army and take money from the naval bilge rat, to kill his own men? Never."

"Exactly. Because bloody Stoughton was right—it *wasn't* treason, merely criminal. Ergo, the simplest motive is the most likely: money."

"And Marchmont wipes his arse with cloth of gold; he doesn't need

money. Whereas Oswald ..."

"Is a politician of no particular means," Grey finished. "Thus by definition in constant need of money."

"Thus by definition without conscience or honor? Quite. Oh, sorry, your half brother's one, too, isn't he? Steward!"

Mr. Bodley, well-acquainted with Quarry's habits, was already bringing in more brandy and a small wooden box of Spanish cigars. Quarry selected two with care, clipped the end of one, and handed it to Grey, who held it for Mr. Bodley's taper.

He seldom smoked, and the rush of tobacco through his blood made his heart pound. He felt a slight twinge in his chest, but ignored it.

Quarry blew a long, pleasurable stream of smoke through pursed lips.

"Can you prove it?" he asked, offhanded. "I believe you implicitly, of course. But beyond that ..."

Grey squinted, trying to blow a smoke ring, but failed dismally.

"I don't suppose it would stand up in court," he said. "But I found this, in Stoughton's portmanteau. As I said, had Stoughton failed to reach the ship, he could expect no protection from the navy. If I were a villain, I'd want a bit of leverage upon my fellow villain, just in case."

He reached into his pocket and removed a small medal, attached to a silk ribbon.

"I saw Oswald wearing this, at the inquiry. I don't know whether he gave it to Stoughton as acknowledgment of their connexion, or whether Stoughton simply stole it. Oswald would claim the latter, I suppose."

Quarry frowned at the bit of metal, pretending that he did not require spectacles to make out the engraving, which he did.

"It's an army decoration, surely; Oswald's never been a soldier," he said, handing it back. "Could simply claim it isn't his, couldn't he?"

"Hardly. His father's name is engraved on the back. And Mortimer Montmorency Oswald—the Third, if you please—is not *quite* so common as 'John Smith,' I daresay."

Quarry laughed immoderately, taking back the medal and turning it over in his hand.

"Montmorency, by God? So his father was in the army, was he? Decorated for valor?"

"Well, no," Grey said. "It's a medal for good conduct. As to what I propose to do," he added, stubbing out his cigar and rising to his feet,

"I am going home to change my clothes. I have an engagement this evening—a masqued ball at Vauxhall."

Quarry blinked up at him through a cloud of smoke.

"A masqued ball? What on earth do you propose to go as?"

"Why, as the Hero of Crefeld," Grey said, taking back the medal and pocketing it. "What else?"



In fact, he went as himself. Not in uniform, but attired in an inconspicuous suit of dark blue, worn with a scarlet domino. Those whom he sought would know him by sight.

They would have to, he thought, seeing the hordes of people streaming through the gates of the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens. If those with whom he sought interview were disguised in any effective way—and one of them at least would certainly be masked—he would have little hope of distinguishing them among the throng.

"Oh," breathed Tom, completely entranced at sight of the trees, largely leafless but strung with hundreds of glimmering lights. "It's fairyland!"

"Something like," Grey agreed, smiling despite the beating of his heart. "Try not to be too enraptured by the local fairies, though; a good many of them would pick your pocket as soon as look at you, and the rest would give you fair value under a bush, with a dose of the clap thrown in for free."

He paid admission for himself and Tom, and they walked into the maze of pathways that spread along the bank of the Thames, leading from grottoes where musicians played, muffled to the eyes against the autumn chill, to arbors where tables of luscious viands were spread, supper boxes piled high behind laboring servants dressed in livery. The great Rotunda, where dancing was held, rose like a bubble in the center of the Gardens, and laughter ran through the night like currents in a river, catching up the merrymakers and carrying them along from adventure to adventure.

"Enjoy yourself, Tom," said Grey, handing Byrd some money. "Don't stay too close; Oswald's a wary bird."

"He won't see me, me lord," Tom assured him, straightening the black domino he wore. "But I'll not be far off, don't you worry!"

Grey nodded, and parting company with his servant, chose a path at random and strolled in the direction of the strains of Handel.

Sheltered by thick hedges and brick walls and thronged with bodies, it was scarcely cold in the gardens, despite the lateness of the season. The chill was pleasant, caressing face and hands—and any other bits of exposed flesh—enhancing the heat of the rest of the body by contrast.

There was a great deal of flesh exposed, to be sure. It gleamed among the light and shadow, set off by the rich colors of the costumes—the scarlets, crimsons, and purples, greens and blues, the flaunting yellow of tropical birds. Here and there a woman—perhaps—who chose to dress in stark black and white by way of contrast. These came dramatic out of the shadows, seeming to emerge from the night itself. One gave him a languishing look as she passed, reached out a hand to him, and as he raised his own, involuntarily, took hold of it, drew one of his fingers into her mouth, and sucked hard.

She drew it slowly free, her teeth—her teeth? He could not tell—exquisite on his skin, then dropped his hand, flashed him a brilliant smile, and ran away, light-footed down the path. He stood a moment looking after her—or him—and then walked on.

He heard whoops of delight approaching, and stepped hastily aside in time to avoid being run down by a covey of girls, scantily clad and equipped with skates, these ingeniously mounted on tiny wheels, so that they whizzed down the path in a body, draperies flying, squealing with excitement. A clatter of applause made him glance aside; a series of spinning plates on rods appeared over a hedge—jugglers in an adjoining alcove.

Music, smoke, food, wine, beer, rum punch, and spectacle—all combined to induce an atmosphere of indulgence, not to say license. The Pleasure Gardens were liberally equipped with dark spaces, alcoves, grottoes, and secluded benches; most of these were being fully employed by couples of all sorts.

He was aware—as most of the merrymakers were not—of the mollies among the crowd. Some dressed as women, others in their own male garb surmounted by outlandish masks, finding each other by glance and grimace, by whatever alchemy of flesh enabled body to seek body, freed by disguise of their usual constraints.

More than one gay blade glanced at him, and now and then one jostled him in passing, a hand brushing his arm, his back, lingering an instant on his hip, the touch a question. He smiled now and then, but

walked on.

Feeling hungry, he turned in to a supper table, bought a box, and found a place on the nearby lawn to eat. As he finished a breast of roast fowl and tossed the bones under a bush, a man sat down beside him. Sat much closer than was usual.

He glanced warily at the man, but did not know him, and deliberately looked away, giving no hint of invitation.

"Lord John," said the man, in a pleasant voice.

It gave him a shock, and he choked, a bit of chicken caught in his throat.

"Do I know you, sir?" he said, politely, when he had finished coughing.

"Oh, no," said the gentleman—for he was a gentleman, by his voice. "Nor will you, I'm afraid. My loss, I am sure. I come merely as a messenger." He smiled, a pleasant smile beneath the mask of a great horned owl.

"Indeed." Grey wiped greasy fingers on his handkerchief. "On whose behalf are you come, then?"

"Oh, on behalf of England. I beg you will forgive the melodrama of that statement," he said, deprecating. "It is true, though."

"Is that so?" The man wore no weapon—these were firmly discouraged in Vauxhall, but the odd knife was common, now and then a pistol.

"Yes. And the message, Lord John, is that you will abandon any efforts to expose Mortimer Oswald."

"Will I?" he said, maintaining a tone of skepticism, though his stomach had clenched hard with the words. "Are you from the navy, then?"

"No, nor from the army, either," said the man, imperturbable. "I am employed by the Ministry of War, if that information is of use to you. I doubt it will be."

Grey doubted it, too—but he didn't doubt the man's assertion. He felt a low, burning anger growing, but this was tinged with a certain sense of fatality. Somehow, he was not truly surprised.

"So you mean Oswald to escape payment for his crimes?" he asked. "His actions have meant the death of several men, the maiming of several more, and the endangerment—the ongoing endangerment, I might add—of hundreds. This means nothing to the government?"

The man turned to face him straight-on, the painted eyes of his owl mask huge and fierce, obliterating the puny humanity of the man's own orbs.

"It will not serve the interests of the country for Oswald to be openly accused—let alone convicted—of corruption. Do you not realize the effect? Such accusations, such a trial, would cause widespread public anger and alarm, discrediting both the army and the navy, endangering relationships with our German allies, giving heart to our enemies ... No, my lord. You will not pursue Oswald."

"And if I do?"

"That would be most unwise," the man said softly. His own eyes were closed; Grey could see the pale lids through the holes of his mask. Suddenly he opened them; they were dark in the flickering light; Grey could not tell the color.

"We will see that Mr. Oswald does no further harm, I assure you."

"And it would suit the War Office's purposes so much better to have a member of Parliament who can be quietly blackmailed to vote as you like, rather than one being hanged in effigy and hounded in the broadsheets?" He had a grip on his anger now, and his voice was steady.

The owl inclined his head gravely, without speaking, and the man gathered his feet under him, preparing to rise. Grey stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Do you know, I think I am not very wise?" he said conversationally.

The man became very still.

"Indeed?" he said, still polite, but noticeably less friendly.

"If I were to speak openly of what I know—to a journalist, perhaps? I have proof, you know, and witnesses; not enough for a trial by jury, perhaps, but more than adequate for a trial in the press. A Question in the House of Lords?"

"Your career means nothing to you?" A note of threat had entered the owl's voice.

"No," Grey said, and took a deep breath, ignoring the harsh stab of pain in his chest. "My honor means something, though."

The man's mouth drew in at the corners, lips pressed tight. It was a good mouth, Grey thought; full-lipped, but not crude. Would he know the man by his mouth alone, if he saw it again? He waited while the man thought, feeling oddly calm. He'd meant what he said, and had no regrets, whatever might come of it now. He thought they would not try to kill him; that would accomplish nothing. Ruin him, perhaps. He didn't care.

At last the owl allowed his mouth to relax, and turned his head away.

"Oswald will resign quietly, for reasons of ill health. Your brother will be appointed to replace him for the remainder of his term. Will that satisfy you?"

Grey wondered for an instant whether Edgar might do the country more harm than Oswald. But England had survived stupidity in government for centuries; there were worse things. And if the War Office thought Grey as corrupt as themselves, what did that matter?

"Done," he said, raising his voice a little, to be heard over the sound of violins from a strolling band of gypsies.

The owl rose silently and vanished into the throng. Grey didn't try to see where he went. All he would have to do was to remove the mask and tuck it under his arm to become invisible.

"Who was that?" said a voice near his ear.

He turned with no sense of surprise—it was that sort of night, where the unreality of the surroundings lent all experience a dreamlike air—to find Neil the Cunt seated beside him on the frosty grass, blue eyes glowing through the feathered mask of a fighting cock.

"Bugger off, Mr. Stapleton," he said mildly.

"Oh, now, Mary, let us not bicker." Stapleton leaned back on the heels of his hands, legs flung oh-so-casually apart, the better to display his very considerable assets.

"You can tell me," he coaxed. "He didn't look as though he wished you well, you know. It might be useful to you to have a friend with your best interests at heart to watch your back."

"I daresay it would," Grey said dryly. "That would not, however, be Hubert Bowles. Or you. Were you following me, or the gentleman who has just left us?"

"If I'd been following him, I'd know who he was, wouldn't I?"

"Quite possibly you *do* know, Mr. Stapleton, and only wish to know whether I do."

Stapleton made a sound, almost a laugh, and edged closer, so that his leg touched Grey's. Not for the first time, Grey was startled at the heat of Stapleton's body; even through the layers of cloth between them, he glowed with a warmth that made the red and yellow feathers of his mask seem about to burst into flames.

"Charming ensemble," Neil drawled, eyes burning through his mask with a boldness far past flirtation. "You have always such exquisite taste in your dress." He reached out to finger the lawn ruffle of Grey's shirt, long fingers sliding slowly—very slowly—down the length of it, slipping between the buttons, his warm touch just perceptible on the bare, cool skin of Grey's breast.

Grey's heart gave a sudden bump, pain stabbed him, and he stiffened. He felt as though his chest were transfixed by an iron rod, holding him immobile. Tried to breathe, but was stopped by the pain. Christ, was he going to die in public, in a pleasure garden, in the company of a sodomite spy dressed like a rooster? He could only hope that Tom was nearby, and would remove his body before anybody noticed.

"What's that?" Stapleton sounded startled, drawing back his fingers as though burned.

Grey was afraid to move, but managed to bend his neck enough to look down. A spot of blood the size of a sixpence bloomed on his shirt.

He had to breathe; he would suffocate. He drew a breath and winced at the resultant sensation—but didn't die immediately. His hands and feet felt cold.

"Leave me," he gasped. "I'm unwell."

Stapleton's eyes darted to and fro, doubtful. His mouth compressed in the shadow of the rooster's open beak, but after a long moment's hesitation, he rose abruptly and disappeared.

Grey essayed another breath, and found that his heart continued to beat, though each thump sent a jarring pain through his breast. He gritted his teeth and reached gingerly inside his shirt.

A tiny nub of metal, like the end of a needle, protruded half an inch from the skin of his chest. Breathing as shallowly as he dared, he pinched it tight between finger and thumb, and pulled.

Pulled harder, air hissing between his teeth, and it came, in a sudden, easing glide.

"Jesus," he whispered, and took a long, deep, unhindered breath. "Thank you." His chest burned a little where it had come out, but his heart beat without pain. He sat for some time, fist folded about the metal splinter, his other hand pressing the fabric of his shirt against the tiny wound to stanch the bleeding.

He didn't know how long he sat there, simply feeling happy. Revelers went by in groups, in couples, here and there a solitary man on the prowl. Some of them glanced at him, but he gave no sign of acknowledgment or welcome, and they passed on.

Then another solitary man came round the corner of the path, his shadow cast before him. Very tall, crowned with a mitre. Grey looked up.

Not a bishop. A grenadier in a high peaked cap, with his bomb sack slung over one shoulder, the brass tube at his belt glowing, eerie with the light of a burning slow match. At least it wasn't another frigging bird, Grey thought, but a feeling of cold moved down his spine.

The grenadier was moving slowly, plainly looking for someone; his head turned from side to side, his features completely hidden by a full-length black-silk mask.

"Captain Fanshawe." Grey spoke quietly, but the blank face turned at once in his direction. The grenadier looked over his shoulder, but the path was vacant for the moment. He settled his sack more firmly on his shoulder and came toward Grey, who rose to meet him.

"I had your note." The voice was the same, colorless, precise.

"And you came. I thank you, sir." Grey pushed the splinter into his pocket, his heart beating fast and freely now. "You will tell me, then?" He must; he would not have come, only to refuse. "Where is Anne Thackeray?"

The grenadier unslung his sack, lowered it to the ground, and leaned back against a tree, arms folded.

"Do you come here often, Major?" he asked. "I do."

"No, not often." Grey looked round and saw a low brick wall, the river's darkened gleam beyond it. He sat down, prepared to listen.

"But you knew I would find the surroundings ... comfortable. That was thoughtful of you, Major."

Grey made no answer, but inclined his head.

The grenadier sighed deeply, and let his hands fall to his sides.

"She is dead," he said quietly.

Grey had thought this likely, but felt still a pang of startled grief at the death of hope, thinking of Barbara Thackeray and Simon Coles.

"How?" he asked, just as quietly. "In childbirth?"

"No." The man laughed, a harsh, unsettling sound. "Last week."

"How?"

"By my hand—or as near as makes no never-mind, as the country people say."

"Indeed." He let the silence grow around them. Music still played, but the nearest orchestra was at a distance.

Fanshawe stood abruptly upright.

"Bloody hell," he said, and for the first time, his voice was alive,

full of anger and self-contempt. "What am I playing at? If I've come to tell you, I shall tell you. No reason why not, now."

He turned his blank, black face on Grey, who saw that there was a single eyehole pierced in it, but the eye within so dark that the effect was like talking to a wall.

"I meant to kill Philip Lister," Fanshawe said. "You've guessed that, I suppose."

Grey made a small motion of the head—though in fact he had not.

"The powder?" he said, one small further puzzle piece falling into place. "You made the unstable bomb cartridges. How did you mean to use them—and how in hell did they get to the battlefields?"

Fanshawe made a small snorting sound.

"Accident. Two of them, in fact. I meant to ask Philip to come with me, to have a look at something in the mill. It would have been a simple thing, to leave him to wait by one of the sheds, go inside and set a match, then leave and go away quietly, wait for the bang. That would have been simple. But, no, I had to be clever about it."

Marcus Fanshawe was an expert, raised in the shadow of a gunpowder mill, fearless in the making and handling of the dangerous energy.

"What is it the Good Book says—*The guilty flee when no man pursueth?* I thought that if he died that way, people would wonder, ask questions. Anne"—there was a bitter pain in his voice at the name —"she might suspect."

And so he had begun the manufacture of high-grade powder, even finer than that required for rifle cartridges. An experimental batch; everyone knew about it, knew the potential risks of dealing with it. If *that* powder were to suddenly explode, no one would be surprised.

"I thought, you see, I knew what I was doing. I'd handled black powder since I was a lad; knew it all. And, in fact, I did. We'd made the powder, corned it with great care, got a number of the special cartridges made up, the rest mostly kegged. Not the slightest difficulty. And then a workman dropped a scraper."

Not a wooden scraper, which would have done no harm; one of the heavy stone scrapers, whose weight was needed for the fine grinding. It should have made no difference; the granite used was inert. But some small inclusion in the stone was flint; it struck an iron fitment of a horse's harness, and made a spark.

"There was that one deadly instant when I saw it, saw the air filled with powder dust, and knew we were all dead," Fanshawe said. "And then the shed went up."

"I see," Grey said, dry-mouthed. He worked his tongue and swallowed. "And the second accident?"

Fanshawe sighed.

"That one wasn't mine. Half the experimental batch was outside, packed in kegs, standing near the shed, where I'd carefully placed it—for Philip. But the explosion went the other way; the kegs didn't explode. And the overseer was one of the men killed in the explosion; the kegs weren't marked specially yet—someone simply loaded them onto the barge with the others. It was weeks before I recovered enough to speak, let alone act. By then, the high-grade powder had already gone to market, so to speak."

"And Anne Thackeray had married Philip Lister."

The peaked cap bent toward him in a nod.

"Eloped," he corrected. "They never had a chance to marry; Philip was called back to his regiment and sent to Prussia. He had just time to send a note to me, asking me to look after Anne. Idiot," he added reflectively. "Philip never could see what was under his nose."

"Evidently not." The brick wall was hard; Grey shifted his buttocks a little, seeking a more comfortable position, but none was to be found. "But you didn't look after her."

"No." Fanshawe's voice had lost its momentary passion, gone back to its colorless normality. "He died. I knew Philip wouldn't have left her well provided for—couldn't. And her father ... Well, you've met him. So I waited."

Waited, with the cold-blooded patience of one accustomed to handling explosive substances. Waited until Anne Thackeray had exhausted her resources.

"She wrote to that fool, Coles, who of course came bleating to me, money in hand. I took it, kept it." And waited.

Anne, pregnant and destitute, had pawned her jewelry, bit by bit. And Marcus Fanshawe, following discreetly in her wake, had bought it, bit by bit.

"I meant, you see, to keep it for her," he explained. "When she had reached a state of complete desperation—then I should come to her, and she would have no choice but to accept me, even as I am. Something she would never do," he added bitterly, "save to escape from utter degradation."

The grenadier was by now wreathed with floating smoke from the burning slow match at his waist, and Grey caught the whiff of brimstone as he moved. Fanshawe drew a length of the slow match from its tube and blew thoughtfully on it; the black silk fluttered, and the end of the slow match brightened like a spark.

"I waited too long, though," he said. "She gave birth, and I should have come then—but I was afraid that she wasn't yet so desperate that she'd have me. She'd taken refuge in a brothel, but with her belly big, they hadn't yet put her to work. I thought after *that* had happened once or twice ..."

Grey felt incredulous revulsion form a ball in the pit of his stomach. "That is the most ... You—you are—" he said, but speech failed him.

"You cannot tell me anything about myself that I do not already know, Major." Fanshawe bent and took what looked like an authentic grenade from the neck of his rucksack. He stood, tossing the small clay sphere casually in one hand.

"I waited too long," he repeated, matter-of-factly. "She took a fever and died. So there it is. Bloody Philip's won again."

With an air of absolute calm, he held the slow match to the fuse of the grenade.

"What in the name of God do you expect to accomplish with this bit of theatrics?" Grey asked, contemptuous. "And what of the child? Did the child live? If so—where is it?"

Fanshawe's head was bent, watching the slow creep of fire through the burning fuse. What was the maniac about? It couldn't be a real grenade.

Could it?

Uneasy, Grey got off the wall. His backside was chilled and his legs stiff.

"The child," he repeated, more urgently. "Where is the child?"

Fanshawe lifted the grenade, weighing it in his hand, and seemed to consider the burning fuse. How long did it take to burn down? Not more than seconds, surely....

"Catch!" he said suddenly, and tossed the sphere at Grey.

Grey fumbled madly, the slippery thing bouncing off his hands, his chest, his stomach, finally trapped precariously against his thighs. Blood hammering in his ears, he carefully took a double-handed grip of the grenade and straightened up.

Fanshawe was laughing, his shoulders shaking silently.

"God damn you for a frigging buffoon!" Grey said, furious, and turning, flung the thing over the garden wall, toward the river.

The night flared red and yellow, blinding him, and a blast of hot air singed his cheeks. The sound of it was mostly drowned in the racket of music and conversation, but he heard a few voices near him, raised in awe or curiosity.

"Oh, fireworks!" someone exclaimed in rapture. "I didn't know there were to be fireworks tonight!"

He sat down suddenly, all the strength in his legs gone to water. The place on his breast where the splinter had come out throbbed in time to his heart, and black-and-yellow spots floated before his eyes.

"Me lord! Are you all right?" He blinked, making out Tom Byrd's anxious face among the spots. Tom had acquired a comic hat somewhere, a huge thing of shoddy red sateen, equipped with a curling feather. This brushed against Grey's face as Byrd bent over him, and he sneezed.

"Yes," he said, and swallowed, tasting sulfur. "Where—" But the grenadier was gone, the space beneath the tree dark and empty.

Not quite empty.

"He's left his sack behind." Tom bent, reaching for it, before Grey could shout a warning. He flung both hands over his head, curling into a ball in a futile attempt at self-protection.

"Oh," said Tom, in tones of astonishment. He was holding up the flap of the bag, peering inside. "Oh, my!"

"What?" Uncurling, Grey made his way on hands and knees to the sack. "What is it?"

Tom reached gently into the sack and drew out the contents. A small baby, perhaps a month old, stirred in its wrappings and opened its amiably popping eyes.

"Oh," said Grey, bereft of words. He held out his arms, and Tom Byrd carefully handed him the child, which was sopping wet but appeared not otherwise the worse for its recent adventures.

Somewhere in the night, there was a sudden, tearing sound above the music, and the air beyond the hedge flashed red and yellow. Grey paid no attention to the screams, the shouts of dismay. His whole being was focused on the bundle in his arms, for he was sure this would be his last vision of the face of Philip Lister.



It was very late, but John Grey was not yet asleep. He sat by the fire in his quarters in the barracks, the distant sounds of the night watch outside his window, writing steadily.

... and so it is ended. You may imagine the difficulties of discovering a wet-nurse in an army barracks in the middle of the night, but Tom Byrd has arranged matters and the child is cared for. I will send to Simon Coles tomorrow, that he may undertake the business of bringing the boy to his family—perhaps such an ambassage will pave the way for him in his courtship of Miss Barbara. I hope so.

I cling to the thought of Simon Coles. His goodness, his idealism—foolish though it may be—is a single bright spot in the dark quagmire of this wretched business.

God knows I am neither ignorant nor innocent of the ways of the world. And yet I feel unclean, so much evil as I have met tonight. It weighs upon my spirit; thus I write to cleanse myself of it.

He paused, dipped the pen, and continued.

I do believe in God, though I am not a religious man such as yourself. Sometimes I wish I were, so as to have the relief of confession. But I am a rationalist, and thus left to flounder in disgust and disquiet, without your positive faith in ultimate justice.

Between the cold consciencelessness of the government and the maniac passion of Marcus Fanshawe, I am left almost to admire the common, ordinary, self-interested evil of Neil Stapleton; he is so nearly virtuous by contrast.

He paused again, hesitating, bit the end of the quill, but then dipped it and went on.

A strange thought occurs to me. There is of course no point of similarity between yourself and Stapleton in terms of circumstance or character. And yet there is one peculiar commonality. Both you and Stapleton know. And for your separate reasons, cannot or will not speak of it to anyone. The odd result of this is that I feel quite free in the company of either one of you, in a way that I cannot be free with any other man.

You despise me; Stapleton would use me. And yet, when I am with you or with him, I am myself, without pretense, without the masks that most men wear in commerce with their fellows. It is ... He broke off, thinking, but there really was no way to explain further what he meant.

... most peculiar, he finished, smiling a little despite himself.

As for the army and the practice of war, you will agree, I think, with Mr. Lister's assertion that it is a brutal occupation. Yet I will remain a soldier. There is hard virtue in it, and a sense of purpose that I know no other way of achieving.

He dipped the pen again, and saw the slender splinter of metal that lay on his desk, straight as a compass needle, dully a-gleam in the candlelight.

My regiment is due to be reposted in the spring; I shall join them, wherever duty takes me. I shall, however, come to Helwater again before I leave.

He stopped, and touched the metal splinter with his left hand. Then wrote, *You are true north*.

Believe me ever your servant, sir,

John Grey

He sanded the letter and shook it gently dry, folded it, and taking the candlestick, dripped wax upon the edge and pressed his ring into the warm soft wax to seal it. The smiling crescent moon of his signet was sharp-cut, clear in the candlelight. He set down the candlestick, and after weighing the letter in his hand for a moment, reached out and touched the end of it to the flame.

It caught, flared up, and he dropped the flaming fragment into the hearth. Then, standing, shucked his banyan, blew out the candle, and lay down, naked in the dark.

To Alex Krislov, Janet McConnaughey, and Margaret J. Campbell, sysops of the Compuserve Books and Writers Community (community.compuserve.com/Books),

the best perpetual electronic literary cocktail party in the world. Thanks!

Acknowledgments



The author would like to thank

- ... Maxim Jakubowski, for inadvertently launching Lord John on his solo career.
- ... Marte Brengle, whose mention of her infamous ancestor Sir Francis Dashwood supplied me and Lord John with the basis of his first adventure.
- ... Karen Watson, of Her Majesty's Customs and Excise, for patient sleuthing through the byways of London in search of plausibly revolting locales and interesting historical trivia.
- ... Laura Bailey and Becky Morgan, for helpful suggestions regarding clothing and daily practicalities.
- ... Barbara Schnell, for making sure the German bits are accurate (well, they started out that way; we hope they still are).
- ... Steven Lopata, Piper Fahrney, Janet McConnaughey, and Larry Tuohy, for useful information on explosions, cannon-loading, fracturing metal, and other violent phenomena of the battlefield.
- ... Lauri Klobas, Eve Ackermann, John S. Kruszka, and the dozens of other kind, intelligent people from the Compuserve Books and Writers Community (whose names I have unfortunately misplaced or forgotten over the last ten years), who are always on hand with suggestions and information ranging from the mundane to the bizarre, and then some.

- ... Silvia Kuttny-Walser, for the title of this book.
- ... the excellent editors who have worked with me on this book, both piecemeal and entire: Max Jakubowski, Betsy Mitchell, Bill Massey, and John Flicker.
 - ... Virginia Norey, aka the Book Goddess, for her wonderful design.

and

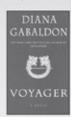
... the unsung genii of the Random House art department, who came up with the marvelous covers for the new Lord John books. Thank you!

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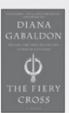
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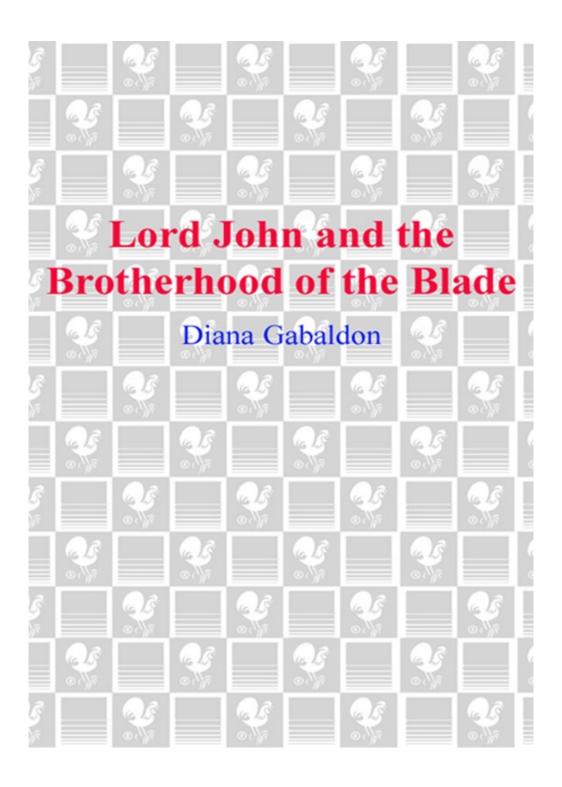
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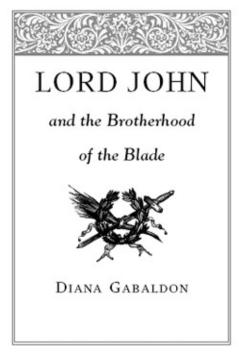
An Outlander Novella

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Dell Books | The Random House Publishing Group





DELACORTE PRESS

LORD JOHN AND THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE BLADE A Delacorte Press Book / September 2007

Published by Bantam Dell A Division of Random House, Inc. New York, New York

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Gabaldon, Diana. Lord John and the brotherhood of the blade / Diana Gabaldon.

p. cm.

1. Seven Years' War, 1756–1763—Fiction. 2. London (England)—History—18th century—Fiction. 3. Nobility—Fiction. 4. Soldiers—Fiction. I. Title. PS3557.A22L66 2007

813'.54—dc22 2007021496

www.bantamdell.com eISBN: 978-0-440-33712-6 v3.0 r2

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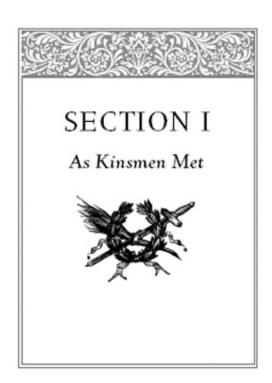
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Chapter 1



All in the Family

London, January 1758 The Society for Appreciation of the English Beefsteak, A Gentlemen's Club

To the best of Lord John Grey's knowledge, stepmothers as depicted in fiction tended to be venal, evil, cunning, homicidal, and occasionally cannibalistic. Stepfathers, by contrast, seemed negligible, if not completely innocuous.

"Squire Allworthy, do you think?" he said to his brother. "Or Claudius?"

Hal stood restlessly twirling the club's terrestrial globe, looking elegant, urbane, and thoroughly indigestible. He left off performing this activity, and gave Grey a look of incomprehension.

"What?"

"Stepfathers," Grey explained. "There seem remarkably few of them among the pages of novels, by contrast to the maternal variety. I merely wondered where Mother's new acquisition might fall, along the spectrum of character."

Hal's nostrils flared. His own reading tended to be confined to Tacitus and the more detailed Greek and Roman histories of military endeavor. The practice of reading novels he regarded as a form of moral weakness; forgivable, and in fact, quite understandable in their mother, who was, after all, a woman. That his younger brother should share in this vice was somewhat less acceptable.

However, he merely said, "Claudius? From *Hamlet*? Surely not, John, unless you happen to know something about Mother that I do not."

Grey was reasonably sure that he knew a number of things about their mother that Hal did not, but this was neither the time nor place to mention them.

"Can you think of any other examples? Notable stepfathers of history, perhaps?"

Hal pursed his lips, frowning a bit in thought. Absently, he touched the watch pocket at his waist.

Grey touched his own watch pocket, where the gold and crystal of his chiming timepiece—the twin of Hal's—made a reassuring weight.

"He's not late yet."

Hal gave him a sideways look, not a smile—Hal was not in a mood that would permit such an expression—but tinged with humor, nonetheless.

"He is at least a soldier."

In Grey's experience, membership in the brotherhood of the blade did not necessarily impute punctuality—their friend Harry Quarry was a colonel and habitually late—but he nodded equably. Hal was sufficiently on edge already. Grey didn't want to start a foolish argument that might color the imminent meeting with their mother's intended third husband.

"It could be worse, I suppose," Hal said, returning to his moody examination of the globe. "At least he's not a bloody merchant. Or a tradesman." His voice dripped loathing at the thought.

In fact, General Sir George Stanley was a knight, granted that distinction by reason of service of arms, rather than birth. His family had dealt in trade, though in the reasonably respectable venues of banking and shipping. Benedicta Grey, however, was a duchess. Or had been.

So far reasonably calm in the face of his mother's impending nuptials, Grey felt a sudden drop of the stomach, a visceral reaction to the realization that his mother would no longer be a Grey, but would become Lady Stanley—someone quite foreign. This was, of course, ridiculous. At the same time, he found himself suddenly in greater sympathy with Hal.

The watch in his pocket began to chime noon. Hal's timepiece sounded no more than half a second later, and the brothers smiled at each other, hands on their pockets, suddenly united.

The watches were identical, gifts from their father upon the occasion of each son's twelfth birthday. The duke had died the day after Grey's twelfth birthday, endowing this small recognition of manhood with a particular poignancy. Grey drew breath to say something, but the sound of voices came from the corridor.

"There he is." Hal lifted his head, evidently undecided whether to go out to meet Sir George or remain in the library to receive him.

"Saint Joseph," Grey said suddenly. "There's another notable stepfather."

"Quite," said his brother, with a sidelong glance. "And which of us

are you suggesting ...?"

A shadow fell across the Turkey carpet, cast by the form of a bowing servant who stood in the doorway.

"Sir George Stanley, my lord. And party."



General Sir George Stanley was a surprise. While Grey had consciously expected neither Claudius nor Saint Joseph, the reality was a trifle ... rounder than anticipated.

His mother's first husband had been tall and dashing, by report, while her second, his own father, had been possessed of the same slight stature, fairness, and tidy muscularity which he had bequeathed to both his sons. Sir George rather restored one's faith in the law of averages, Grey thought, amused.

A bit taller than himself or Hal, and quite stout, the general had a face that was round, cheerful, and rosily guileless beneath a rather shabby wig. His features were nondescript in the extreme, bar a pair of wide brown eyes that gave him an air of pleasant expectation, as though he could think of nothing so delightful as a meeting with the person he addressed.

He bowed in greeting, but then shook hands firmly with both Greys, leaving Lord John with an impression of warmth and sincerity.

"It is kind of you to invite me to luncheon," he said, smiling from one brother to the other. "I cannot say how greatly I appreciate your welcome. I feel most awkward, then, to begin at once with an apology—but I am afraid I have imposed upon you by bringing my stepson. He arrived unexpectedly this morning from the country, just as I was setting out. Seeing that you will in some sense be brothers ... I, er, thought perhaps you would pardon my liberty in bringing him along to be introduced." He laughed, a little awkwardly, and blushed; an odd mannerism in a man of his age and rank, but rather endearing, Grey thought, smiling back despite himself.

"Of course," Hal said, managing to sound cordial.

"Most certainly," Grey echoed. He was standing closest to Sir George, and now turned to the general's companion, hand extended in greeting, and found himself face to face with a tall, slender, dark-eyed young man.

"My Lord Melton, Lord John," the general was saying, a hand on

the young man's shoulder. "May I present Mr. Percival Wainwright?"

Hal was a trifle put out; Grey could feel the vibrations of annoyance from his direction—Hal hated surprises, particularly those of a social nature—but he himself had little attention to spare for his brother's quirks at the moment.

"Your servant, sir," he said, taking Mr. Wainwright's hand, with an odd sense of previous meeting.

The other felt it, too; Grey could see the faint expression of puzzlement on the young man's face, a faint inturning of fine dark brows, as though wondering where ...

Realization struck them simultaneously. His hand tightened involuntarily on the other's, just as Wainwright's grip clutched his.

"Yours, sir," murmured Wainwright, and stepped back with a slight cough. He reached to shake Hal's hand, but glanced briefly back at Grey. His eyes were also brown, but not at all like his stepfather's, Grey thought, the momentary shock of recognition fading.

They were a soft, vivid brown, like sherry sack, and most expressive. At the moment, they were dancing with mirth at the situation—and filled with the same intensely personal interest Grey had seen in them once before, at their first meeting ... in the library of Lavender House.

Percy Wainwright had given him his name—and his hand—upon that occasion, too. But Grey had been an anonymous stranger then, and the encounter had been necessarily brief.

Hal was expressing polite welcome to the newcomer, though giving him the sort of coolly professional appraisal he would use to sum up an officer new to the regiment.

Grey thought Wainwright stood up well to such scrutiny; he was well-built, dressed neatly and with taste, clear-skinned and clean-featured, with an attitude that spoke of both humor and imagination. Both traits could be dangerous in an officer, but on a personal level ...

Wainwright seemed to be discreetly exercising his own curiosity with regard to Grey, flicking brief glances his way—and little wonder. Grey smiled at him, now rather enjoying the surprise of this new "brother."

"I thank you," Wainwright said, as Hal concluded his welcome. He pulled his lingering attention away from Grey, and bowed to Hal. "Your Grace is most ... gracious."

There was an instant of stricken silence following that last, halfstrangled word, spoken as Wainwright realized, a moment too late, what he had said.

Hal froze, for the briefest instant, before recovering himself and bowing in return.

"Not at all," he said, with impeccable politeness. "Shall we dine, gentlemen?"

Hal turned at once for the door, not looking back. And just as well, Grey thought, seeing the hasty exchange of gestures and glances between the general and his stepson—horrified annoyance from the former, exemplified by rolling of the eyes and a brief clutching of the shabby wig; agonized apology by the latter—an apology extended wordlessly to Grey, as Percy Wainwright turned to him with a grimace.

Grey lifted one shoulder in dismissal. Hal was used to it—and it was his own fault, after all.

"We are fortunate in our timing," he said, and smiled at Percy. He touched Wainwright's back, lightly encouraging him toward the door. "It's Thursday. The Beefsteak's cook does an excellent ragout of beef on Thursdays. With oysters."



Sir George was wise enough to make no apology for his stepson's gaffe, instead engaging both the Greys in conversation regarding the campaigns of the previous autumn. Percy Wainwright appeared a trifle flustered, but quickly regained his composure, listening with every evidence of absorption.

"You were in Prussia?" he asked, hearing Grey's mention of maneuvers near the Oder. "But surely the Forty-sixth has been stationed in France recently—or am I mistaken?"

"No, not at all," Grey replied. "I was temporarily seconded to a Prussian regiment, as liaison with British troops there, after Kloster-Zeven." He raised a brow at Wainwright. "You seem well-informed."

Wainwright smiled.

"My stepfather thinks of buying me a commission," he admitted frankly. "I have heard a great deal of military conversation of late."

"I daresay you have. And have you formed any notions, any preferences?"

"I had not," Wainwright said, his vivid eyes intent on Grey's face. He smiled. "Until today." Grey's heart gave a small hop. He had been trying to forget the last time he had seen Percy Wainwright, soft dark curls disheveled and his stock undone. Today, his hair was brushed smooth, bound and powdered like Grey's own; he wore a sober blue, and they met as proper gentlemen. But the scent of Lavender House seemed to linger in the air between them—a smell of wine and leather, and the sharp, deep musk of masculine desire.

"Now then, Percy," the general said, slightly reproving. "Not so hasty, my boy! We have still to speak with Colonel Bonham, and Pickering, too, you know."

"Indeed," Grey said lightly. "Well, you must allow me to give you a tour of the Forty-sixth's quarters, near Cavendish Square. If we are to compete with some other regiment for the honor of your company, we must be allowed to exhibit our finer points."

Percy's smile deepened.

"I should be most obliged to you, my lord," he said. And with that, some small, indefinable shift occurred in the air between them.

The conversation continued, but now as a minuet of manners, precise and delicate. And just as a courting couple might exchange worlds of meaning with a touch, so they did the same, with no touch at all, their unspoken conversation flowing unhindered beneath the disguise of routine courtesies.

"Are you fond of dogs, Lord John?"

"Very much so, though I am afraid I have none myself at present. I am seldom at home, you see."

"Ah. You make your home with your brother, when in England?" Percy glanced in Hal's direction, then brought his eyes back to Grey's, the question plain in them.

Does your brother know?

Grey shook his head, attention ostensibly on the bread roll he was tearing. The question of what Hal knew was a good deal too complex to deal with here. Leave it that Hal did not know about Lavender House, nor his brother's association with it. That was enough for now.

"No," he said casually. "I stay at my mother's house in Jermyn Street." He looked up, meeting Percy's eyes directly. "Though perhaps I shall seek lodgings elsewhere, now that her domestic arrangements will be altered."

Percy's mouth lifted in a slight smile, but Sir George, pausing in his own conversation to chew a morsel of beef, had caught this remark, and now leaned across the table, his round face reflecting earnest goodwill.

"My dear Lord John! You certainly must not alter your arrangements on my account! Benedicta desires to keep her house in Jermyn Street, and I should be most distressed to feel that my presence had deprived her of her son's company."

Grey noticed his brother's lips press thin at the notion of Sir George's occupation of Jermyn Street. Hal glanced sharply at his brother, admonition plain in his face.

Oh, no, you don't! I want you there, keeping an eye on this fellow.

"You are too kind, sir," Grey replied to Sir George. "But the matter is not pressing. I shall rejoin the regiment shortly, after all."

"Ah, yes." Sir George looked interested at that, and turned to Hal. "Have you fresh orders for the spring, my lord?"

Hal nodded, a plump oyster poised on his fork. "Back to France as soon as the weather permits. And your troops ..."

"Oh, it's the West Indies for us," Sir George replied, beckoning for more wine. "Seasickness, mosquitoes, and malaria. Though I will say that at my age, that prospect is somewhat less daunting than mud and frostbite. And the rations are less difficult to manage, of course."

Hal relaxed a bit at the revelation that Sir George would not be remaining long in England. Benedicta's money was her own, and safe, for the most part—or as safe as law and Hal could make it. It was his mother's physical welfare with which he was mostly concerned at the moment. That was, presumably, the point of this luncheon: to indicate firmly to Sir George that Benedicta Grey's sons took a close interest in her affairs, and intended to continue doing so after her marriage.

Surely you don't suppose he would beat her? Grey inquired silently of his brother, brows raised. Or install a mistress at Jermyn Street?

Hal adopted a po-faced expression, indicating that Grey was an innocent in the wicked ways of men. Fortunately, Hal himself was not so trusting!

Grey rolled his eyes briefly and averted his gaze from his brother as the steward brought in a dish of hot prunes to accompany the mutton.

Sir George and Hal went off into an intense discussion of the problems of recruitment and supply, leaving Grey and Percy Wainwright once more to their own devices.

"Lord John?" Wainwright spoke low-voiced, brows raised. "It is Lord John?"

"Lord John," Grey agreed, with a brief sigh.

"But—" Percy glanced again at Hal, who had put down his fork and

was drawing up a complicated pattern of troop movements upon the linen tablecloth, using the silver pencil he always kept to hand. The steward was observing this, looking rather bleak.

Is he not a duke, then? "Lord John" was the proper address for the younger son of a duke, while the younger son of an earl would be simply "the Honorable John Grey." But if Grey's father had been a duke, then ...

"Yes," Grey said, casting his own eyes up toward the ceiling in token of helplessness.

Apparently, Sir George had not had time to brief his stepson on the matter, beyond warning him not to address Hal as "Your Grace"—the proper address for a duke.

Grey made a slight gesture, not quite a shrug, indicating that he would explain the intricacies of the situation later. The simple fact of the matter, he reflected, was that he was quite as stubborn as his brother. The thought gave him an obscure feeling of pleasure.

"So you think of purchasing a commission in the Forty-sixth?" Grey asked, using his bread to soak up the juices on his plate.

"Perhaps. If that should be agreeable to ... all parties," Wainwright said, glancing at his stepfather and Hal, then back at Grey.

And would it be agreeable to you?

"I should think it an ideal arrangement," Grey replied. He smiled at Wainwright, a slow smile. "We should be brothers-in-arms, then, as well as brothers by marriage." He picked up his wineglass in toast to the idea, then took a sip of wine, which he rolled round his mouth, enjoying the feeling of Percy's eyes fixed on his face.

Percy drank, too, and licked his lips. They were soft and full, stained red with wine.

"Lord John—tell me, please, how did you find our Prussian allies? Was it an artillery regiment with which you were placed, or foot? I confess, I am not so familiar as I should be with arrangements on the eastern front."

Sir George's question pulled Grey's attention momentarily away from Percy, and the conversation became general again. Hal was relaxing by degrees, though Grey could see that he was still a long way from succumbing entirely to Sir George's charm.

You are a suspicious bastard, you know, he said with a glance at his brother after one particularly probing question.

Yes, and a good thing, too, Hal's dark look at him replied, before turning to Percy Wainwright with a courteous renewal of Grey's

invitation to visit the regimental quarters.

By the time the pudding arrived, though, cordial relations appeared to have been established on all fronts. Sir George had replied satisfactorily to all Hal's questions, seeming quite untroubled by the intrusive nature of some of them. In fact, Grey had the feeling that Sir George was privately rather amused by his brother, though taking great care to ensure that Hal was not aware of it.

Meanwhile, he and Percy Wainwright had discovered a mutual enthusiasm for horse-racing, the theater, and French novelists—a discussion of this last subject causing his brother to mutter, "Oh, God!" beneath his breath and order a fresh round of brandy.

Snow had begun to fall outside; in a momentary lull in the conversation, Grey heard the whisper of it against the window, though the heavy drapes were closed against the winter's chill, and candles lit the room. A pleasant shiver ran down his back at the sound.

"Do you find the room cold, Lord John?" Wainwright asked, noticing.

He did not; there was an excellent fire, roaring away in the hearth and constantly kept up by the ministrations of the Beefsteak's servants. Beyond that, a plentitude of hot food, wine, and brandy ensured sufficient warmth. Even now, the steward was bringing in cups of mulled wine, and a Caribbean hint of cinnamon spiced the air.

"No," he replied, taking his cup from the proffered tray. "But there is nothing so pleasant as being inside, warm and well-fed, when the elements are hostile without. Do you not agree?"

"Oh, yes." Wainwright's eyelids had gone heavy, and he leaned back in his chair, his clear skin flushed in the candlelight. "Most ... pleasant." Long fingers touched his neckcloth briefly, as though finding it a little tight.

Awareness floated warm in the air between them, heady as the scents of cinnamon and wine. Hal and Sir George were beginning to make noises indicative of leave-taking, with many expressions of mutual regard.

Percy's long dark lashes rested for a moment on his cheek, and then swept up, so that his eyes met Grey's.

"Perhaps you would be interested to come with me to Lady Jonas's salon—Diderot will be there. Saturday afternoon, if you are at liberty?"

So, shall we be lovers, then?

"Oh, yes," said Grey, and touched the linen napkin to his mouth. His pulse throbbed in his fingertips. "I think so."

Well, he thought, I don't suppose it's really incest, and pushed his chair back to arise.



Tom Byrd, Grey's valet, was rubbing at the gold lace on Grey's dress uniform with a lump of bread to brighten it, and listening with a lively interest to Grey's account of the luncheon with General Stanley and his stepson.

"So the general means to make his home here, me lord?" Grey could see Tom calculating what this change might mean to his own world; the general would doubtless bring some of his own servants, including a valet or orderly. "Will the son come, too, this Mr. Wainwright?"

"Oh, I shouldn't think so." In fact, the notion had not occurred to Grey, and he took a moment to examine it. Wainwright had said he had his own rooms, somewhere in Westminster. Having seen the cordial relations that appeared to exist between Sir George and his stepson, though, he had assumed that this state of things was either to do with the cramped nature of the general's present lodgings—or with Wainwright's desire for privacy.

"I don't know. Perhaps he would." It was an unsettling thought, though not necessarily unpleasant. Grey smiled at Tom, and pulled his banyan close for warmth; despite the fire, the room was cold. "I shouldn't think he will bring a valet with him if he does come, though."

"Ho," Byrd said thoughtfully. "Would you want me to do for him as well, me lord? I wouldn't mind," he added quickly. "Is he a dandy, though, would you say?"

There was such a hopeful tone to this last question that Grey laughed.

"Very kind of you, Tom. He dresses decently, but is no macaroni. I believe he means to take up a commission, though. Nothing but more uniforms for you, I'm afraid."

Byrd made no audible reply to this, but his glance at Grey's boots, standing caked with mud, straw, and manure by the hearth, was eloquent. He shook his head, squinted at the coat he was holding,

decided it would do, and stood up, brushing bread crumbs into the fire.

"Very good, me lord," he said, resigned. "You'll look decent for the wedding, though, if I die for it. Come to that, if we're a-going back to France in March, you'd best be calling on your tailor this week."

"Oh? All right. Make me a list, then, of what's needed. Smallclothes, certainly." Both of them grimaced, in joint memory of what passed for drawers on the Continent.

"Yes, me lord." Tom bent to shovel embers into the warming pan. "And a pair of doeskin breeches."

"Don't I have a pair?" Grey asked, surprised.

"You do," Byrd said, straightening, "and Lord only knows what you sat on whilst wearing 'em." He gave Grey a disapproving look; Tom was eighteen, and round-faced as a pie, but his disapproving looks would have done credit to an old gaffer of eighty.

"I've done me best, me lord, but bear in mind, if you go out in those breeches, don't be taking your coat off, or folk will be sure you've beshit yourself."

Grey laughed, and stood aside for Tom to warm the bed. He shucked his banyan and slippers and slid between the sheets, the heat grateful on his chilly feet.

"You have several brothers, don't you, Tom?"

"Five, me lord. I'd never had a bed to meself until I came to work for you." Tom shook his head, marveling at his luck, then grinned at Grey. "Don't suppose you'll need to share your bed with this Mr. Wainwright, though, will you?"

Grey had a sudden vision of Percy Wainwright, stretched solid beside him in the bed, and an extraordinary sense of warmth pulsed through him, quite incommensurate with the heat provided by the warming pan.

"I doubt it," he said, remembering to smile. "You can put out the candle, Tom, thank you."

"Good night, me lord."

The door closed behind Tom Byrd, and Grey lay watching the firelight play over the furnishings of the room. He was not particularly attached to places—a soldier couldn't be—nor was this house a great part of his past; the countess had bought it only a few years before. And yet he felt a sudden peculiar nostalgia—for what, he couldn't have said.

The night was still and cold, and yet seemed full of restless

movement. The flicker of the fire; the flicker of arousal that burned in his flesh. He felt things shift and stir, unseen, and had the odd feeling that nothing would ever again be the same. This was nonsense, of course; it never was.

Still, he lay a long time sleepless, wishing time to stay; the night, the house, and himself to remain as they were, just a little longer. And yet the fire died, and he slept, conscious in his dreams of the rising wind outside.

Chapter 2



Not a Betting Man

Grey spent the next morning in a drafty room in Whitehall, enduring the necessary tedium of a colonels' meeting with the Ordnance Office, featuring a long-winded address by Mr. Adams, First Secretary of the Ministry of Ordnance. Hal, pleading press of business, had dispatched Grey in his place—meaning, Grey thought, manfully swallowing a yawn, that Hal was likely either still at home enjoying breakfast, or at White's Chocolate House, wallowing in sugared buns and gossip, whilst Grey sat through bum-numbing hours of argument over powder allocations. Well, rank had its privileges.

He found his situation not unpleasant, though. The 46th was fortunately provided for with regards to gunpowder; his half brother Edgar owned one of the largest powder mills in the country. And as Grey was junior to most of the other officers present, he was seldom required to say anything, and thus free to allow his thoughts to drift into speculation regarding Percy Wainwright.

Had he mistaken the attraction? No. He could still feel the extraordinary warmth of Wainwright's eyes—and the warmth of his touch, when they had shaken hands in farewell.

The notion of Percy Wainwright's joining the regiment was intriguing. Considered in the sober light of day, it might also be dangerous.

He knew nothing of the man. True, the fact that he was General Stanley's stepson argued that he must be at least discreet—but Grey knew several discreet villains. And he must not forget that his first meeting with Wainwright had been at Lavender House, a place whose polished surfaces hid many secrets.

Had Wainwright been with anyone on that occasion? Grey frowned, trying to recall the scene, but in fact, his attention had been so distracted at the time that he had noticed only a few faces. He *thought* that Percy had been alone, but ... yes. He must have been, for he had not only introduced himself—he had kissed Grey's hand.

He'd forgotten that, and his hand closed involuntarily, a small jolt running up his arm as though he had touched something hot.

"Yes, I'd like to throttle him, too," muttered the man beside him.

"Bloody windbag." Startled, Grey glanced at the officer, an infantry colonel named Jones-Osborn, who nodded, glowering, at Mr. Adams, whose rather high-pitched voice had been going on for some time.

Grey had no idea what Adams had been saying, but grunted agreement and glowered in sympathy. This provoked the man on his other side, who, encouraged by this show of support, shouted a contradiction at Adams, liberally laced with epithet.

The secretary, Irish by birth and no mean hand at confrontation, replied in kind with spirit, and within moments, the meeting had degenerated into something more resembling a session of Parliament than the sober deliberations of military strategists.

Drawn perforce into the ensuing melee, this followed by a cordial luncheon with Jones-Osborn and the rest of the anti-Adams faction, Grey thought no more of Percy Wainwright until he found himself at mid-afternoon in his brother's office at regimental headquarters.

"Jesus," Hal said, laughing over Grey's account of the morning's events. "Better you than me. Was Twelvetrees there?"

"Don't know him."

"Then he wasn't there." Hal flipped a hand in dismissal. "You'd have noticed him slipping a dagger in Jones-Osborn's back. Adams's lap-wolf. What did you think of the new brother? Shall we have him?"

Familiar as he was with Hal's quick-change methods of conversation, it took Grey only an instant to catch his brother's meaning.

"Wainwright? Seems a decent fellow," he said, affecting casualness. "Have you heard anything of him?"

"No more than we learned yesterday. I asked Quarry, but neither he nor Joffrey knew anything of the man."

That said much; between them, Harry Quarry, one of the two regimental colonels, and his half brother, Lord Joffrey, knew everyone of note in both military and political circles.

"You liked him?" Grey asked. Hal frowned a little, considering.

"Yes," he said slowly. "And it would be awkward to refuse him, should he desire to take a commission with us."

"No experience, of course," Grey observed. This was not a stumbling block, but it was a consideration. Commissions were normally purchased, and many officers had never seen a soldier nor held a weapon prior to taking up their office. On the other hand, most of the 46th's senior officers were veterans of considerable battlefield experience, and Hal chose new additions carefully.

"True. I should suggest his beginning at second lieutenant, perhaps —or even ensign. To learn his business before moving higher."

Grey considered this, then nodded.

"Second lieutenant," he said. "Or even first. There will be the family connexion. It wouldn't be fitting, I think, that he should be an ensign." Ensigns were the lowliest of the commissioned officers, at everyone's beck and call.

"Perhaps you're right," Hal conceded. "We'd put him under Harry, of course, at least to start. You would be willing to guide him?"

"Certainly." Grey felt his heart beat faster, and forced himself to caution. "That is, should he wish to join us. The general did say they had not decided. And Bonham would take him at once as a captain in the Fifty-first, you know."

Hal huffed and looked down his nose at the thought that anyone might prefer to reign in hell rather than serve in heaven, as it were, but reluctantly conceded the point.

"Yes, I should like to make him captain eventually, if he proves able. But we leave for France in less than three months; I doubt that is time to try him adequately. Can he even handle a sword, do you think?" Wainwright had not been wearing one; still, most nonmilitary gentlemen did not.

Grey shrugged.

"I can find out. Do you wish me to broach the matter of commission with Wainwright directly, or shall you open negotiations with the general?"

Hal drummed his fingers on the desk for a moment, then made up his mind.

"Ask him directly. If he is to be a member of both the family and the regiment, I think we must treat him as such from the beginning. And he is much nearer to you in age. I think he is somewhat afraid of me." Hal's brows knitted briefly in puzzlement, and Grey smiled. His brother liked to think himself modest and inoffensive, and affected not to know that while his troops idolized him, they were also terrified of him.

"I'll talk to him, then."

Grey made to rise, but Hal waved him back, still frowning.

"Wait. There is—another matter."

Grey looked sharply at his brother, hearing the note of strain in Hal's voice. Distracted by thoughts of Percy Wainwright, he hadn't really looked at Hal; now he saw the tightness around his brother's mouth and eyes. Trouble, then.

"What is it?"

Hal grimaced, but before he could reply, footsteps came down the corridor, and someone knocked diffidently at the jamb of the open door. Grey turned to see a young hussar, his face flushed from the cold wind outside.

"My lord? A message, sir, from the ministry. I was told to wait upon an answer," he added awkwardly.

Hal turned a dark countenance on the messenger, but then beckoned impatiently and snatched the message.

"Wait downstairs," he said, waving the hussar away. He broke the seal and read the note quickly, muttered something blasphemous under his breath, and seized a quill to scribble a reply at the bottom of the page.

Grey rocked back in his chair, waiting. He glanced round the office, wondering what could have happened since yesterday. Hal had shown no signs of worry during their luncheon with the general and Percy.

He could not have said what drew his eye to the scrap of paper. Hal's office resembled nothing so much as the den of some large beast of untidy habit, and while both Hal and his elderly clerk, Mr. Beasley, could lay their hands on anything wanted within an instant, no one else could find so much as a pin in the general chaos.

The paper itself lay among a quantity of others scattered on the desk, distinguished only by a ragged edge, as though it had been torn from a book. Grey picked it up, glanced at it casually, then stiffened, eyes glued to the page.

"Do let my papers alone, John," Hal said, finishing his reply with a viciously scrawled signature. "You'll muddle everything. What's that you have?" He tossed his quill on the desk and snatched the paper impatiently from Grey. He made to put it back on the desk, then caught sight of the words and froze.

"It *is*, is it not?" Grey asked, feeling queer. "Father's writing?" It was a rhetorical question; he had recognized both the hand and the style of writing at once. Hal hadn't heard in any case; the blood had drained from his face, and he was reading the journal page—for that is what it clearly was—as though it were notice of his own execution.

"He burnt it," Hal whispered, and swallowed. "She said he'd burnt it."

"Who?" Grey asked, startled. "Mother?"
Hal glanced up at him sharply, but ignored his question.

"Where did this come from?" he demanded, barely waiting for Grey's shrug before shouting, "Mr. Beasley! I want you!"

Mr. Beasley, promptly emergent from his own pristine sanctuary, denied any knowledge of the sheet of paper and confessed complete ignorance of its means of arrival in Hal's office. He was, though, able to supply the helpful information that the paper had definitely not been upon the desk earlier in the day.

"How on earth would you know?" Grey inquired, giving the desk and its contents a disparaging look. Two beady-eyed stares turned upon him. They'd know. Grey coughed.

"Yes. In that case ..." He trailed off. He had been about to inquire who had come into the office during the day, but realized at once the difficulty of the question. Dozens of people visited the office every day: clerks, sutlers, officers, royal messengers, gunnery sergeants, weaponers.... He'd come in once and found a man with a dancing bear on a chain and a monkey on his shoulder, come to collect payment for performing at a jollification for the troops in honor of the queen's birthday.

Still, surely some effort should be made.

"How long had you been here before I came in?" he asked. Hal rubbed a hand over his face.

"I came in just before you. Otherwise, I should have seen it at once."

"Ought we call in the door guard, and the men in the building?" Grey suggested. "Query each of them as to anyone who might have entered the office whilst it was unoccupied?"

Hal's lips compressed. He'd got control of himself; Grey could see his mind working again, and rapidly.

"No," he said, and consciously relaxed his shoulders. "No, it's not important." He crumpled the sheet of paper into a ball, and threw it with apparent casualness into the fire. "That will be all, Mr. Beasley."

Mr. Beasley bowed and went out. The paper glowed and burst into flame. Grey's hands clenched involuntarily, wanting to seize it from destruction, but it was already gone, ink stark for an instant on the charring paper before it fell to ash. The unexpected sense of loss made him speak more sharply than his wont.

"Why did you do that?"

"It doesn't matter." Hal glanced at the door, to be sure that Beasley was out of earshot, then took the poker and thrust it into the fire, stirring it so that sparks flew up the chimney like a swarm of fiery

bees, making sure no trace of the paper remained. "Forget it."

"I am not inclined to forget it. What did you mean, 'He burnt it'?"

Hal put the poker back in its stand with a careful precision.

"That was not a suggestion," he said softly. "It was an order—Major."

Grey's jaw tightened.

"I do not choose to obey you—sir."

Hal turned, startled.

"What the hell do you mean, you bloody don't choose to—"

"I mean I won't," Grey snapped, "and you frigging well know it. What do you propose to do about it? Clap me in irons? Have me locked up for a week on bread and water?"

"Don't bloody tempt me." Hal glared at him, but it was clear to both of them that he had given in. Partly.

"Keep your voice down, at least." Hal went to the door, looked out into the hallway, but didn't shut it. That was interesting, Grey thought. Did Hal suppose that Mr. Beasley might creep up to listen outside the door, if it were closed?

"Yes, it was a page from one of the journals," Hal said, very quietly. "The last one."

Grey nodded briefly; the date on the page had been two weeks prior to the date of their father's death. The duke had been a meticulous diarist; there was a small bookcase in the library in Jermyn Street, filled with row upon row of his journals, kept over more than thirty years. Grey was familiar with them, and grateful to his father for having kept them; they had enabled him to know at least a little of his father as a man, once he reached his own manhood. The last journal in the bookshelf ended three months prior to the duke's death; there must have been another, but Grey had never seen it.

"Mother told you Father had burnt it? Did she say why?"

"No, she didn't," Hal said briefly. "I didn't inquire, under the circumstances."

Hal was still watching the open door. Grey couldn't tell whether he was merely on the alert, or avoiding meeting Grey's eyes. Hal was a good liar when he needed to be, but Grey knew his brother extremely well—and Hal knew him. He took a deep breath, ordering his thoughts. The smell of burnt paper was sharp in his nose.

"Clearly it wasn't burnt," Grey said slowly. "So we must assume, first, that it was stolen, and then that whoever took it has kept it until now. Who, and why? And why does he—whoever he is—inform you

now that he has it? And why did Mother—"

"Damned if I know." Hal did look at him then, and Grey's anger faded as he saw that his brother was indeed telling the truth. He saw something else that disquieted him extremely—his brother was afraid.

"It is a threat of some sort?" he asked, lowering his voice still further. There had been nothing on the page he had read to suggest such a thing; it had been part of an account of a meeting his father had had with a longtime friend and their discussion of astronomy, quite innocuous. Therefore, the page had plainly been meant only to inform Hal of the existence of the journal itself—and whatever else it might contain.

"God knows," Hal said. "What the devil could it—well." He rubbed a knuckle hard across his lips, and glanced at Grey. "Don't speak to Mother about it. I'll do it," he added, seeing Grey about to protest.

The sound of boots and voices along the passage prevented further conversation. Captain Wilmot, with his sergeant and a company clerk. Hal reached out and quietly closed the door; they waited in silence as the noise died away.

"Do you know a man named Melchior Ffoulkes?" Hal asked abruptly.

"No," Grey replied, wondering whether this had to do with the matter at hand, or was a change of subject. "I am reasonably sure I'd recall him, if I did."

That provoked the ghost of a smile from Hal.

"Yes, you would. Or a private soldier named Harrison Otway? From the Eleventh Foot."

"What a ridiculous name. No, who is he?"

"Captain Michael Bates?"

"Well, I've heard of him, at least. Horse Guards, is he not? Flash cove, as Tom Byrd puts it. What, may I ask, is the purpose of this catechism? Do sit down, Hal." He sat himself, and after a moment's hesitation, Hal slowly followed suit.

"Have you ever met Captain Bates?"

Grey was becoming annoyed, but answered flippantly.

"Not to remember, certainly. I couldn't swear that I've never shared a bed with him in an inn, of course—"

Hal's hand gripped his forearm, so hard that he gasped.

"Don't," Hal said, very softly. "Don't make jokes."

Grey stared into his brother's eyes, seeing the lines of his face cut deep. The journal page had shocked him, but he had already been disturbed.

"Let go," Grey said quietly. "What's wrong?"

Hal slowly withdrew his hand.

"I don't know. Not yet."

"Who are these men? Have they anything to do with—" He glanced at the fireplace, but Hal shook his head.

"I don't know. I don't think so—but it's possible." The sound of footsteps echoed in the hallway, and Hal stopped speaking abruptly. The footsteps were distinctive, the sound of a heavy man with a decided limp. Ewart Symington, the second regimental colonel, Harry Quarry's opposite number.

Hal grimaced and John nodded understanding. Neither one of them desired to speak with Symington at the moment. They stood silent, waiting. Sure enough, the steps came to a halt, and a fist thundered on the panels of the door. Symington was as brutal of manner as of appearance, resembling nothing so much as a dyspeptic boar.

Another thunderous assault on the door, a moment's pause, and Symington uttered a muffled oath and limped off.

"He'll be back," Hal said, under his breath, and took his cloak from its peg by the door. "Come with me to White's; we'll talk on the way."

Grey thrust his arms into his greatcoat and a moment later they had escaped into the street, Hal having instructed Mr. Beasley to tell Colonel Symington that Lord Melton had gone to Bath.

"Bath?" Grey asked, as they exited. "At this time of year?" It was no more than half-past three, yet twilight was louring. The pavement was dark with wet and the air thick with the scent of oncoming snow.

Hal waved off his waiting carriage, and turned the corner.

"Anywhere closer, and he'd follow me there. Say what you will of the man, he's damned persistent." That was said with grudging respect; persistence was Symington's chief military virtue, and not a mean one. In more social situations, it was somewhat trying.

"What does he want?"

Grey asked only for the sake of delaying discussion, and was not surprised to receive only a moody shrug from Hal. His brother appeared no more eager to resume their conversation than he was, and they walked for half a mile or so in silence, each alone with his thoughts.

Grey's own thoughts were a jumble, veering from anticipation and curiosity at the thought of Percy Wainwright to concern at his brother's obvious agitation. Over all of it, though, was the image of the page he had held so briefly in his hands.

He forced all other thought from his mind, concentrating on remembering, committing the words he had read to memory. He still felt the shock of Hal's throwing the paper into the fire, and could not bear the thought that those words of his father's, pedestrian as they might be, should be lost to him. The duke's journals were no secret, and yet he had read them secretly, abstracting one at a time and smuggling each volume to his room, returning them to their shelf, careful that no one should see.

He could not have said why it seemed important to keep this postmortem relationship with his father private. Only that it had been.

He had more or less succeeded in fixing at least the substance of the vanished page in memory, when Hal finally hunched his shoulders and spoke abruptly.

"There has been talk. Regarding conspiracies."

"When is there not? Which particular conspiracy concerns you?"

"Not me, so much." Hal settled his hat more firmly, bending his head into the wind. "And it has not yet blown up into open scandal, but it almost certainly will—and soon."

"I don't doubt it," Grey observed caustically. "There hasn't been a decent scandal since Christmas. Who does this one involve?"

"A sodomite conspiracy to undermine the government by assassination of selected ministers."

Grey felt a tightening of the belly, but replied casually. It was not the first time he had heard of such a notion; sodomitical associations and conspiracies were a standby of street criers and Fleet Street hacks whenever news became too slow.

"And why does this concern you?"

Hal fixed his eyes on the slimy cobbles.

"Us. It is a thing that was said. Of—of Father." The word struck Grey in the pit of the stomach, like a pebble from a sling. He was not sure he had ever heard Hal use the word "Father" any time in the last fifteen years.

"That he was a sodomite?" Grey said, incredulous. Hal drew a deep breath, but seemed to relax a bit.

"No. Not in so many words. Nor was it—thank God—a popular rumor. Only random accusations at the time of his death, made by members of the Society—such accusations were common, thrown at almost every man of any visibility connected with the South Sea

Bubble. The scandal was blamed on 'companies of sodomites'—though God knows it was blamed on every other group, interest, or person anyone could think of, as well. But the Society was prominent at the time, and sodomitical conspiracies were their particular obsession."

"The Society?" Grey said blankly. "Which Society is this?"

"I forgot. You would not have been old enough to hear much at the time—"

"Damned little, in Aberdeen." Grey made no attempt to keep an edge of bitterness from his voice, and his brother glanced sharply at him.

"Which is precisely why you were sent there," Hal said, his voice level. "In any case, it is the Society for the Reformation of Manners to which I refer; you *have* heard of them?"

"I have, yes." Angry and unsettled, Grey was making no effort to hide his feelings, and let distaste and contempt show in his voice. "Prigs and puritans, who will not acknowledge their own base urges, but find delight—and release, no doubt—in accusations of corruption, in blackening the characters of innocent men. They are—"

Hal put a restraining hand on his arm again—no more than a touch, this time—to keep him from speaking further, as two chairmen went by at the trot, their heads wreathed in white smoke from their panting breath.

The cold and twilight kept many folk indoors, but there were those whose livelihoods compelled them to the streets, and as they approached St. James Street, there began to be more of them. A balladeer, chestnut sellers, apple-women crying the virtues of their wizened fruit. Grey saw his brother scrutinize each person they passed, as though he suspected them of something.

"Captain Michael Bates is thought to be deeply involved," Hal said at last. "The general told me of the matter after you and Wainwright had left yesterday; Bates's father is General Ezekial Bates—long retired, but an intimate of General Stanley's."

"Ah," Grey said. "I see." He felt unsettled still, vaguely alarmed, pointlessly angry—but this intelligence relieved his mind a little. At least now he knew why the matter had come to Hal's attention. "And the other men you mentioned—Otway and Ffoulkes?"

"Otway is a private soldier in the Eleventh Infantry, a nobody. Ffoulkes is a reasonably well-known solicitor in Lincoln's Inn."

"How are these men connected?"

"Through Bates."

Captain Bates and Ffoulkes had met, according to General Stanley, when Ffoulkes had handled a minor matter of business for the captain's family. Otway had evidently met Bates in a tavern near Temple Stairs, formed an unwholesome connexion with him, and then later been introduced to Ffoulkes, though the general did not know the circumstances.

"Indeed," said Grey, thinking of the bog-houses near Lincoln's Inn, a spot much patronized by both lawyers and mollies. "This ... association is what they refer to as a 'company of sodomites'? It seems lacking in both membership and organizing principles, I think."

Hal snorted a little; his breath purled white in the winter air.

"Oh, there's more. Our friend Ffoulkes, it seems, has a French wife. Who in turn has two brothers. One of these brothers is a notorious pederast—notorious even by French standards—while the other is a colonel in the French army."

Grey grunted in surprise.

"And is there any evidence of—I suppose it must be treason?"

"It is. And there is. The War Office got wind of something, and has been quietly pursuing the matter for some months. Bates—he was General Stanley's chief aide-de-camp for some time before joining the Horse Guards, by the way—"

"Christ."

"Precisely. He apparently had been passing secret materials to Otway, who in turn delivered these to Ffoulkes in the course of their assignations. And from there, of course ..."

Grey drew the evening air deep into his lungs. The last of his defensive anger chilled, leaving him cold. It was a personal matter—but not directly personal. Hal's concern was for the general, of course—and for their family, lest the old rumors be resurrected in light of fresh scandal, stimulated by their mother's new marriage.

"What has been done?" he asked. "I have heard nothing of it in the streets, read nothing in the periodicals."

Hal's shoulders hunched a little; they were passing a gate where torches burned, and Grey saw his brother's shadow, foreshortened and shrunk, the image of an old man.

"It has been kept as quiet as possible. Bates and Otway were both arrested yesterday, though."

"And Ffoulkes?"

Hal's head lifted, and he blew out a long white breath.

"Ffoulkes shot himself this morning."

Grey walked on, mechanically, no longer feeling chill or cobble.

"May God have mercy on his soul," he said at last.

"And ours," Hal said, without humor.



Hal could not or would not say more, and they walked the rest of the way in silence. Disturbed in mind though he was, Grey was jerked out of his thoughts as they turned into St. James Street.

Candlelight streamed welcomingly through the windows of White's, illuminating what appeared to be the body of a man lying on the pavement by the door. As they approached the building, Grey saw a head pop out of the club's open door, survey the body, then pop back in, only to be succeeded by a different head, which repeated this procedure.

"Do you know him?" Grey asked his brother, as they came up to the body. "Is he a member?" Grey was of course a member of White's, as well, but seldom patronized the club, finding the cozy shabbiness and excellent food of the Beefsteak more appealing.

Hal squinted at the body, and shook his head.

"No one I know."

The body lay prone, legs sprawled apart beneath a greatcoat of decent quality. The man's hat was also a good one; it had fallen off and rolled against the wall, resting on edge there like a tipsy beggar.

"Is he dead, do you think?"

The man's wig had slipped askew, half covering his face. It had begun to snow lightly, and between the flickering light and the swirling flakes, it was impossible to perceive whether he was breathing.

"Let me look; perhaps—" Hal stooped to touch the man, but was prevented by a shout from the doorway.

"Don't touch him! Not yet!" An excited young man issued from the club and seized Hal's arm. "We haven't put it in the book yet!"

"What, the betting book?" Hal demanded.

"Yes—Rogers says he's dead, and I say he's not. Two guineas on it! Will you join the wager with me, Melton?"

"He's dead as a doornail, Melton!" came a shout from the open door, presumably from Rogers. "Whitbread and Gallagher are with me!"

"He ain't, I say!" The young man slapped his palm on the doorjamb. "You lot couldn't tell a corpse from a tailor's ham!"

"Hoy!" Grey caught a glimmer of movement from the corner of his eye and whirled round, hand on his sword—but not in time to grab the ragged boy who had darted in to snatch the body's hat. A hoot of triumph drifted back through the thickening snow.

"Call the Watch, for God's sake. We can't let him lie here, dead or not," Hal said impatiently. "He'll be picked clean."

Grey obligingly belted down the street to the Fount of Wisdom, where he found two members of the Watch fortifying themselves against the weather. Reluctantly gulping their mulled cider, they huddled themselves grumbling into coats and hats and came back with him to White's, where he found his brother standing guard over the body, leaning on his sword.

"About time," Hal said, sheathing it. "They're here!" he shouted, turning toward the open door, where Mr. Holmes, the club's steward, hovered in anticipation.

Holmes promptly vanished, and the call of, "The book is closed, gentlemen!" rang through the house.

In moments, the body was surrounded by a crowd of eager bettors, who poured out into the snow, still arguing amongst themselves.

"What do you say?" Grey muttered to Hal. He sniffed the air, but was unable to detect any telltale scent of death, above the waft of smoke, coffee, and food drifting from the club. "Ten to one he's alive," he said, on impulse.

"You know I never bet on anything but cards," Hal muttered back. Still, he held his position at the front of the group, curious as any of the bettors, as one of the Watchmen gingerly lifted the wig away from the man's face.

There was a moment's silence as the face was revealed, gray and slack as potter's clay, eyes closed. The Watchman bent close, cupping the fallen jaw, then jerked upright.

"He's alive! I felt his breath on me 'and!"

The group exploded into voice and action then, several men hastening to lift the victim and carry him inside, others calling out for hot coffee, a doctor, brandy, had the man a pocketbook, papers? Where was the doctor, for God's sake?

A tall, gray-haired man came out of the cardroom glaring at the interruption.

"Who wants a doctor?"

"Oh, there you are, Longstreet. Your patient, sir." Hal greeted the doctor, whom he evidently knew, and gestured toward the man in the greatcoat, who had been laid out on a settee and was being tenderly ministered to by the same men who had been wagering on his demise moments earlier.

Doctor Longstreet grimaced, shed his coat, and began to roll up his sleeves.

"All right. I'll see. You lot, get out of it. Holmes—fetch me a bowl from the kitchen, if you would be so good." He pulled a collapsible fleam from his pocket and flicked it open with a practiced air.

Mr. Holmes hesitated.

"You aren't going to do anything ... messy, are you? We've only just had that settee reupholstered."

Longstreet gave the steward a humorless grin.

"I'm going to bleed him, yes—but I'll endeavor not to stain your damask. Bowl!"

Grey, being nearest and not given to squeamishness, helped to lift the man—who was both tall and stout—and remove his outer clothes. The man's eyelids flickered for a moment, and his lips moved, but he relapsed back into unconsciousness, not stirring even when Longstreet took hold of his bared arm and cut into the flesh below the elbow.

Blood pattered into the bowl, and one of the onlookers went quickly outside, whence the sound of vomiting was heard through the still-open door. Mr. Holmes cast a look of despair at the blood spattering the carpet, and went out to render aid.

"I don't suppose you carry ammoniac salts on your person, do you?" Longstreet asked Grey, frowning at the unconscious man. "I hoped the flow of blood might revive him, but ..."

"My brother does. A moment." Hal had disappeared into the cardroom with most of the other members, who had ceased to be interested in the subject of their wager, now that it was won or lost. Grey went in and returned almost at once with Hal's enameled snuffbox, which, when opened, proved to contain not snuff but a small corked vial containing sal volatile.

Dr. Longstreet accepted this with a nod of thanks, pulled the cork, and passed the bottle closely beneath the man's nostrils.

"Why does your brother—Melton is your brother, I perceive? The resemblance is marked—why does he carry salts?"

"I believe his wife is subject to fits of fainting," Grey said casually.

In fact, Hal himself now and then suffered odd spells of dizziness. Having fainted once on the parade ground on a hot day, he had resolved never to appear at such a disadvantage again, and had taken to carrying salts—though to the best of Grey's knowledge, his brother had never actually resorted to them. He was reasonably sure that Hal would prefer this precaution not to be public knowledge, however.

"Ah!" The doctor made a sound of satisfaction; the patient's face had suddenly convulsed.

Matters thereafter were so intent as to allow no further conversation. With continued application of salts, cloths wrung out in warm water and applied to the limbs, and—as returning consciousness allowed—judicious infusions of brandy, the gentleman was gradually returned to a state of consciousness, though he remained unable to speak, and merely frowned in a puzzled way when spoken to.

"I believe he has suffered an apoplexy," Longstreet remarked, surveying his patient with interest. "Common in subjects of a choleric disposition. Observe the burst small vessels in the cheeks—and most particularly the nose."

"Indeed." Grey peered at the man. "Will he recover his powers of speech, do you suppose?"

Longstreet shrugged, but appeared in good humor. The man had survived, after all. What more could be asked of a doctor?

"With good nursing, it's possible. Do we know who he is?"

Grey had gone through the pockets of the man's greatcoat and discovered among the contents an open letter, addressed to a Dr. Henryk van Humperdinck, at 44 Great Ormond Street.

The gentleman gave some signs of response when addressed by this name, and so a message was sent to Great Ormond Street, and the patient carried off to one of the bedrooms upstairs, under the direction of the long-suffering Mr. Holmes, until his connexions should be located and informed.

"Did you have any money on him?" the doctor asked jovially, wiping his hands on a towel. "I hope I have not beggared you by saving his life. Or your brother, for that matter."

"No," Grey assured him. "I should have won, had I been in time to place a bet. And my brother is not a betting man."

"No?" Longstreet sounded surprised.

"No. He wagers at whist, but only, he says, because he has faith in his skill, not his luck."

Longstreet gave him a queer look.

"Not a betting man?" he repeated, and laughed in cynic fashion. Seeing Grey's look of incomprehension, his own face changed, and he pursed his lips, as though considering whether to say something.

"You've never seen it?" he said at last, looking sideways at Grey beneath gray brows. "Truly?"

Receiving no reply, he strode across the room and picked up the betting book, which had been left on a side table, following Mr. Holmes's careful record of the settling of the wager on Dr. Humperdinck's state of animation.

Longstreet flipped back through the pages, long-fingered and swift, finally discovering what he wanted with a small grunt of satisfaction.

"Here." He handed the book to Grey, pointing out an entry that stood alone at the head of a page, otherwise blank, save the signatures of witnesses to the wager in the margin.

The Earl of Melton states that the Duke of Pardloe was not a traitor. He stakes twenty thousand pounds on the truth of this. All comers welcome.

Below this was Hal's formal signature, big and black. Grey felt as though he had suddenly forgot how to breathe.

On the opposite page were three entries, the first written in small, evenly controlled letters, as though in deliberate contrast to the passion of Hal's wager:

Done. Nathaniel Twelvetrees, Captain, 32nd Foot

Below this were two more names, carelessly scrawled.

Accepted. Arthur Wilbraham, MP Accepted. George Longstreet

Grey worked his tongue in an effort to regain enough saliva to speak, and mechanically noted the date of the wager. 8 July, 1741. A month after his father's death. There was no indication that the wager had ever been settled.

"You really didn't know?" Longstreet was regarding him with something like sympathy, mixed with curiosity.

"No," Grey said, achieving speech. With some effort, he closed the

book and set it down. "George Longstreet. You?"

Doctor Longstreet shook his head.

"My cousin. I witnessed the wager, though." The doctor's mouth, long and mobile, quirked at one side. "It was a memorable night. Your brother came very close to calling Twelvetrees out and was dissuaded only by Colonel Quarry—he was only a lieutenant at the time, of course—who pointed out that he could not honorably risk leaving his mother and younger brother defenseless, were he killed. You must have been no more than a child at the time?"

Blood burned in Grey's cheeks at that. He had had nothing to drink, but felt a rushing in his ears, together with that peculiar sense of detachment that sometimes came upon him after too much wine, as though he were not responsible for the actions of his body.

"Mr. Holmes!" he called, his voice surprisingly calm. "A quill and ink, if you please."

He opened the book, and taking the quill hastily supplied by Holmes, who stood by anxious-faced and silent, he wrote neatly beneath his brother's entry:

Lord John Grey joins this wager, upon the same terms.

He hadn't got twenty thousand pounds, but it didn't seem to matter. "If you gentlemen will be so kind as to witness my hand?" He held out the ink-stained quill to Longstreet, who took it, looking amused. Holmes coughed, low in his throat, and Grey turned round to see his brother standing in the doorway, watching, expressionless. The sound of laughter and shouts of dismay came from the cardroom behind him.

"What in God's name is the matter with you?" Hal asked, very quietly.

"The same thing that's the matter with you," Grey said. He took his hat and coat from the hallstand and bowed. "Good night," he said politely. "Your Grace."

Chapter 3



Pet Criminal

Once home, he could not sleep, and after a restless hour spent churning the bedclothes into knots, he got up, poked the fire into life, and sat by the window with a blanket round his shoulders, watching the snow come down.

Ice crystals coated the glass like clouded lace, but Grey barely noticed the cold; he was burning. And not with the fires of sudden lust this time—rather, with the desire to walk across town to his brother's house, drag Hal from his bed, and assault him.

He could—he supposed—understand why Hal had never mentioned the wager to him. In the wake of the scandal following the duke's death, Grey had been shipped off promptly to some of his mother's distant relatives in Aberdeen. He had spent two grim years in that gray stone city, during which time he had seen his brother only once.

And when he had come back to England, Hal had been virtually a stranger, so preoccupied with the business of reconstituting the regiment that he had no time to spare for either friends or family. And then ... well, then he himself had met Hector, and in the cataclysms of personal discovery that followed that event had had no attention to spare for anyone else, either.

The brothers had only come to know each other again when Grey took up his commission with the regiment, and discovered that he shared the family taste and talent for soldiering. Certainly Hal had not forgotten the wager, but as it had plainly never been settled, it was conceivable that it might not have occurred to him to speak of it, years after the fact.

No, what was galling him was not that Hal had never mentioned the wager, but the fact that his brother had never told *him* openly that he believed their father had not been a traitor. Grey had lived on the tacit assumption that this was the case, but the matter had never been mentioned between them—and a casual observer would have drawn quite a different impression from Hal's actions, taking these as the efforts of a man to live down shame and scandal, repudiating his patrimony in the process.

In fact, Grey admitted to himself, he had only assumed that Hal

shared his faith in their father because he could not bear to think otherwise. If he were honest with himself, he must admit now that if Hal had not spoken to him of the matter, it was as much because he had never brought it up as because Hal had avoided discussion. He had been afraid to hear what he feared was the truth: that Hal knew something unpleasant and certain about the duke that he did not, but had spared him that knowledge out of kindness.

While it was good to discover the truth of Hal's feelings now, any sense of relief he might have felt in the discovery was obscured by outrage. The fact that he knew the outrage to be largely unjustified only made it worse.

Worst of all was a sense of self-disgust, a feeling that he had wronged Hal—if only in his thoughts—and anger at the sense that he had been betrayed into committing injustice.

He got up, restless, and strode round the room, careful to step softly. His mother's room lay below his.

He couldn't even have it out with Hal, as that would involve his admitting to doubts that he preferred to keep buried, particularly now that they had been disproved. At least, his doubts regarding Hal had been disproved. As to his father ... what the devil did that page from the missing journal mean? Who had left it? And why had his mother told Hal the duke had burnt the journal, when clearly he had not?

He glanced at the floor beneath his feet, debating the wisdom of going down and rousing his mother in order to ask her. But Hal had wished to speak to her alone; Grey supposed that was his right. Still, if either one of them thought he would be fobbed off now with further evasions or easy reassurances ... He realized that he was clenching his fists, and opened them.

"You are grossly mistaken," he said softly, and rubbed his palm against his leg. "Both of you."

He had left his watch open on the desk. It chimed softly now, and he picked it up, holding it toward the fire to see the time—half two. He set it down again, next to the journal that also lay there, one of his father's. He'd taken the volume at random from the library and brought it upstairs with him, for no good reason. Only feeling the need to touch it.

He laid a hand gently on the cover. Rough-tanned leather, the pages sewn in. It was like all the duke's journals, made to withstand travel and the vicissitudes of campaign.

... watched the Perseids fall before the dawn twilight this morning, with

V. and John. We lay upon the lawn, and counted more than sixty meteors within the space of an hour, at least a dozen very bright, with a visible tinge of blue or green.

He repeated the sentence to himself, making sure he had it word for word. That was the only sentence on the page Hal had burned that mentioned himself by name; a nugget of gold.

He hadn't remembered that night at all, until the casual record brought it back: cool damp from the lawn seeping through his clothes, excitement overcoming the pull of sleep and the longing for his warm bed. Then the "Ah!" from his father and Victor—yes, "V." was Victor Arbuthnot, one of his father's astronomical friends. Was Arbuthnot still alive? he wondered. The sudden jerk of his heart at sight of the first shooting star—a brief and silent streak of light, startling as though a star had indeed fallen suddenly from its place.

That was what he most remembered—the silence. The men had talked at first, chatting casually; he had paid no attention, half-dreaming as he was. But then their conversation had faded, and the three of them lay flat on their backs, faces turned upward to the heavens, waiting together. Silent.

Poets spoke of the song of the heavens, the music of the spheres—and God knew, it was true. The silence of the stars chimed in the heart.

He paused by the window, looking up into a lavender sky, fingers pressed against the icy glass. No stars tonight; the snowflakes came down out of the dark, rushing toward him, endless, uncountable. Silent, too, but not like the stars. Falling snow whispered secrets to itself.

"And you are a fanciful idiot," he said out loud, and turned away from the window. "Be writing poetry, next thing."

He made himself lie down, and lay staring up at the plastered ceiling. Remembering the stargazing had quieted him, though he thought he would not sleep. Too many thoughts swirled through his brain, endless and confusing as the snowflakes. Missing journals, reappearing pages, ancient wagers—was that wager at the root of the animus between his brother and Colonel Twelvetrees? And the so-called sodomite conspiracy—had that anything to do with his family's affairs? He might as well try to fit the falling snowflakes together in a way that made sense.

It was only as his eyes closed that he realized that while snowflakes cannot fit, they do accumulate. One upon another, until the sheer mass of them forms a crust that a man might walk upon—or fall through.

He would wait and see how deep the drifts lay, come morning.



In the morning, though, a letter came.

"Geneva Dunsany is dead." Benedicta, Dowager Countess of Melton, set down the black-bordered letter very gently by her plate, her face pale. The footman froze in the act of presenting more toast.

For an instant, the words had no meaning. The hot tea in Grey's cup warmed his fingers through the china, fragrant steam in his nostrils mingling with the scents of fried kippers, hot bread, and marmalade. Then he heard what his mother had said, and set down his cup.

"God rest her soul," he said. His lips felt numb, in spite of the tea. "How?"

The countess closed her eyes for an instant, looking suddenly her age.

"In childbirth," she said, drawing a long breath, and opening her eyes. "The child has survived, so far. A son, Lady Dunsany says." The color was beginning to seep back into the countess's face, and she picked up the letter again.

"Here is something remarkable, though terribly sad," she said. "She says that the child's father—that would be Ellesmere, old Ludovic, you know—died on the same day as his wife."

"Oh, dear!" His cousin Olivia looked at her aunt, tears beginning to well up in her eyes. Olivia was a tenderhearted girl to begin with, and her inclination to be affected by sentiment had grown more pronounced with her own advancing pregnancy. Though Grey supposed that the news that Geneva Dunsany had perished in giving birth was bound to have a morbid effect on a young woman in similar condition.

Grey coughed, wishing to distract his cousin—and to keep his own feelings at bay for the moment.

"I do not suppose the earl died of a broken heart," he said. "The shock, perhaps?"

"How do you know it was not a broken heart?" Olivia asked reproachfully, dabbing at her eyes with her napkin. "Were anything to happen to my darling Malcolm, I am sure I should not survive the news!" Her eyes overflowed at thought of her new husband, presently serving in the wilds of America.

The countess gave her son a jaundiced look; Olivia had come back to live with her aunt after Malcolm Stubbs's departure for Albany, and Grey supposed that his cousin's vivid imagination and outspoken emotions were perhaps beginning to wear upon his mother, who was kind but not particularly patient.

"I believe Ellesmere was a good fifty years his wife's senior," Grey said, in an attempt to make amends. "And while I am sure he was fond of her, I think his death much more likely to have been due to an apoplexy or seizure at the shock than to an excess of sorrow."

"Oh." Olivia sniffed and wiped her nose with the napkin. "Oh, but the poor little mite, left an orphan on the very day of his birth! Is that not terrible?"

"Terrible," the countess agreed absently, continuing to read. "It was not an apoplexy, though, nor yet a surfeit of emotion. Lady Dunsany says that the earl perished through some tragic accident."

Olivia looked blank.

"An accident?" she repeated, and wiped absently at her nose before replacing the napkin in her lap. "What happened?"

"Lady Dunsany does not say," the countess reported, frowning at the letter. "How peculiar. They are very much distressed, of course."

"Had Ellesmere any family," Grey inquired, "or will the Dunsanys take the child?"

"They have taken him. Her chief concern, beyond the immediacies of the situation, is Isobel. She was so close to her sister, and her grief ..." The countess laid down the letter, shaking her head, then pursed her lips and focused a thoughtful look on Grey.

"She asks whether you might see fit to visit them soon, John. Isobel is so fond of you; Lady Dunsany thinks perhaps you might be able to distract her somewhat from the burden of her grief. The funeral—or perhaps funerals; do you suppose they will be buried together?—are set for Thursday next. I suppose that you would go to Helwater fairly soon in any case, to assure yourself of the welfare of your pet criminal before the regiment departs, but—"

"Your pet criminal?" Olivia, who had resumed buttering her toast, paused openmouthed, knife in midair. "What—?"

"Really, Mother," Grey said mildly, hoping that the sudden lurch of his heart did not show. "Mr. Fraser is—"

"A Jacobite, a convicted traitor, and a murderer," his mother

interrupted crisply. "Really, John, I cannot see *why* you should have gone to such lengths to keep such a man in England, when by rights, he should have been transported. Indeed, I am surprised he was not hanged outright!"

"I had reasons," Grey replied, keeping voice and eyes both level. "And I am afraid you must trust my judgment in the matter, Mother."

A sudden flush burned in his mother's cheeks, though she held his gaze, lips pressed tight. Then something moved in her eyes, some thought.

"Of course," she said, her voice suddenly as colorless as her cheeks. "To be sure." Her eyes were still fixed on Grey, but she was no longer looking at him, rather at something far beyond him. She drew a long breath, then pushed back from the table in sudden decision.

"You will excuse me, my dears. I have a good many things to do this morning."

"But you've barely touched a thing, Aunt Bennie!" Olivia protested. "Won't you have a kipper, a bit of porridge perhaps ..." But the countess had already gone, in a whisk of skirts.

Olivia turned a suspicious gaze on Grey.

"What was that about?"

"I have no idea," Grey replied honestly.

"Something about this wretched Mr. Fraser of yours disturbed her," Olivia said, frowning at the doorway through which the countess had vanished. "Who *is* he?"

Christ, how was he to answer such a question? He chose the only possible avenue, that of strict factuality.

"He is, as my mother remarked, a Jacobite officer, a Scot. He was amongst the prisoners at Ardsmuir; I came to know him there."

"But he is at Helwater? How comes he to be there?" Olivia asked, baffled.

"Ardsmuir was closed, the prisoners removed," he replied, paying careful attention to his kipper. He lifted the bones and set them neatly aside, shrugging one shoulder. "Fraser was paroled, but not allowed to return to Scotland. He labors as a groom at Helwater."

"Hmm!" Olivia seemed satisfied with that. "Well, and serve him right, no doubt, horrid creature. But why does Aunt Bennie call him your pet?"

"Only her little jest," Grey replied casually, forking up a bite of kipper. "As I am a longtime friend to the Dunsany family, I visit Helwater regularly—and as the erstwhile governor of Ardsmuir, it behooves me to see that Mr. Fraser is well behaved and in good health."

Olivia nodded, chewing. She swallowed her toast, then, with a covert glance at the footman, leaned toward Grey, lowering her voice.

"Is he really a *murderer*?" she whispered.

That took Grey off guard, and he was obliged to simulate a minor coughing fit.

"I do not believe so," he said at last, clearing his throat. "I imagine my mother spoke rhetorically. She has the lowest opinion of Jacobites in general, you see."

Olivia nodded wisely, eyes round. She had been no more than five or six at the time of the Rising, but must have heard some echoes of the public hysteria as the forces of Charles Stuart made what had seemed for a time their inexorable advance on London. Even the king had prepared to flee, and the streets were flooded with broadsheets painting the Highlanders as vicious savages who skewered children, pillaged and raped without mercy, and put whole villages to the torch.

As for his mother's personal animus toward the Jacobites ... he did not know whether Olivia had ever been told anything; probably not. It had all happened long before she was born, and neither his mother nor Hal ever spoke of it, he knew from experience. Well, it was no business of Grey's to inform Olivia of the gory details of the family scandal. His mother and brother were both determined to let the past bury its dead, and surely ...

He stopped eating, an extraordinary apprehension making the hair prickle on his nape.

No. Surely not. But it had been the mention of Fraser and the word "Jacobite" that had made the countess blench and pale. Yet she had known about Fraser—Grey had gone several times to Helwater since Fraser had been paroled there. He had never made much of the matter himself, though, never mentioned Fraser's presence as the principal reason for his visits. No, some thought had occurred to his mother, something that had not struck her before. Could it be that she had suddenly thought his reasons for keeping James Fraser in England had to do with ...

Something small and cold slid wormlike through his entrails.

Olivia had lost interest in the Scottish prisoner, and was happily outlining her plans for the suit he would wear for the wedding.

"Yellow velvet, I think," she said, squinting consideringly at him

over the tea cozy. "It will be lovely against Aunt Bennie's blue, it will set off your own coloring, and I *think* it will be good for the general's stepson. Your mother says he is dark—have you met him?"

"I have, and yes, he is dark," Grey said, his innards performing an immediate *volte-face* and growing noticeably warm. "You intend that we should be dressed alike? In yellow? Olivia, we shall look like nothing so much as a pair of singing canaries." He'd spoken in all seriousness, but the observation sent her off into giggles, and made her snort tea through her nose. Which absurd sight made Grey himself laugh.

"Well," Olivia said, recovering first, "if you *do* mean to go up to the Lake District, I suppose you'd best go quickly, in order to be back in good time for the wedding. Whether it is yellow or not, you *will* have a new suit, and the fittings ..."

Grey was no longer attending, though. Christ, he *would* have to go at once, if he meant to go at all. The funeral and Isobel Dunsany's need quite aside, the wedding was in late February; were he to delay, he would have no chance to go and return before the regiment set sail for France in March.

For the first time, his anticipation at the prospect of visiting Helwater was tinged with slight dismay. Percy Wainwright ... but after all, there was no hurry in that quarter, was there? Particularly not if Wainwright should indeed join the regiment. And he was meant to meet the man this afternoon; he would be able to explain. Perhaps even to ...

A movement in the doorway drew his eye, and he glanced up to see his mother standing there, hand braced against the jamb.

"Go if you must," she said abruptly. "But for God's sake, John, be careful."

Then she turned and was gone again. Thoroughly unsettled, he picked up his cup, found the tea had gone cold, and drank it just the same.

Chapter 4



Chisping

It was chisping, that ambiguous sort of precipitation, half snow, not quite drizzle. Misshapen flakes fell slow and scattered, spiraled through gray air and brushed his face, tiny cold touches so fleeting as not even to leave a sense of wetness in their wake. Dry tears, he thought. Appropriate to his sense of distant mourning.

He paused at the edge of Haymarket, waiting his chance to dodge through the traffic of cabs, carriages, horses, and handcarts. It was a long walk; he might have ridden, called for a chair, or taken his mother's carriage, but he had felt restless, wanting air and movement and the proximity of people with whom he need not talk. Needing time to prepare, before he met Percy Wainwright again.

He was shocked, of course. He had known Geneva since her birth. A lovely girl, with great charm of manner and a light in her eyes. Somewhat spoilt, though attractively so, and reckless to a degree. Superb on a horse. He would not have been surprised in the slightest to hear that she had broken her neck in some hunting accident, or died in leaping a horse across some dangerous chasm. The sheer ordinariness of death in childbirth ... that seemed somehow wrong, obscurely unworthy of her.

He still remembered the occasion when she had gone riding with him, challenged him to a race, and when he declined, had calmly unpinned her hat, leaned over, and smacked his horse on the rump with it, then kicked her own mount and galloped off, leaving him to subdue a panicked sixteen-hand gelding, then to pursue her at breakneck pace over the rocky fells above Helwater. He was a good horseman—but he'd never caught her.

As though still challenged by the memory, he plunged into the street and dashed across the cobbles, ducking under the startled nose of a hurtling cab horse, and arrived at the other side, heart pounding and the cabbie's curses ringing in his ears.

He turned down St. Martin's Lane, feeling the blood thrum in his ears and fingers, with that half-shameful sense of pleasure in being alive that was sometimes the response to news of death, or the sight of it.

He could not yet think of her as dead. Perhaps he would not until he reached Helwater, and found himself amongst her family, walking through the places that had known her. He tried to envision her, but found that her face had faded from his memory, though he kept a strong sense of her form, lithe in a brown habit, chestnut-haired and quick as a fox.

Quite suddenly, he wondered whether he could recall Percy Wainwright's face. He had spent all of a two-hour luncheon the day before yesterday in gazing at it, but was suddenly unsure. And much of the second hour in imagining the form that lay beneath the neat blue suit; he was more sure of *that*, and his heart sped up in anticipation.

What he saw in his mind's eye, though, was another face, another form, vivid as flame among the damp greens and grays of the fells. He saw it, the long, suspicious nose, the narrowed eyes hostile as a leopard's, as though the man himself stood before him, and the pleasant thrum of his blood changed at once to something deeper and more visceral.

He realized now that the vision had sprung up in him at once, the moment his mother had spoken the words, "Geneva Dunsany is dead"—though he had instinctively been suppressing it. Geneva Dunsany meant Helwater. And Helwater meant not only his memories of Geneva, nor the griefs of her parents and sister. It meant Jamie Fraser.

"God damn it," he said to the vision, under his breath. "Not *now*. Go away!"

And walked on to his engagement, heedless of the chisping snow, his heated blood in ferment.



They had agreed to meet beforehand, and go together to Lady Jonas's salon. Not sure either of Wainwright's means or his style, Grey had chosen the Balboa, a modest coffeehouse chiefly patronized by sea traders and brokers.

The place was always cheerful and bustling, with men huddled intently in small groups, plotting strategy, wrangling over contracts, absorbed in the details of business in a fragrant, invigorating atmosphere of roasting coffee. Now and then a clerk or 'prentice

rushed in in panic to fetch out one of the patrons to deal with some emergency of business—but in the postluncheon lull, most of the merchants had returned to their offices and warehouses; it would be possible at least to have a conversation.

Grey was punctual by habit and arrived just as his pocket watch chimed three, but Percy Wainwright was already there, seated at a table near the back.

He did recognize the man; indeed, his putative stepbrother's face seemed to spring smiling out of the dimness, vivid as though he sat by a candle flame, and the disquieting wraith of Jamie Fraser disappeared at once from Grey's mind.

"You are very prompt," he remarked, waving Wainwright back onto his stool and taking one opposite. "I hope you did not have too far to come?"

"Oh, no; I have rooms quite near—in Audley Street." Wainwright nodded, indicating the direction, though his eyes stayed fixed on Grey, friendly, but intensely curious.

Grey was equally curious, but took care not to seem to examine his companion too closely. He ordered coffee for himself, and took the opportunity of Wainwright's speaking to the waiter to look, covertly. Good style, an elegant but quiet cut, the cloth a little worn, but originally of good quality. Linen very fine, and immaculate—as were the long, knob-jointed fingers that took up the sugar tongs, Wainwright's dark brows lifting in inquiry.

Grey shook his head.

"I am not fond of sugar, but I do like cream."

"As do I." Wainwright set down the tongs at once, and they smiled unexpectedly at finding that they shared this trifling preference—then smiled wider, finally laughing at the absurdity, for lack of anything sensible to say.

Grey picked up his coffee and spilled some into the saucer to cool, wondering quite what to say next. He was intensely curious to learn more of Percy Wainwright, but not sure how closely he might inquire without giving offense.

He had already learned a little from his mother: Percy Wainwright was the son of an impoverished clergyman who had died young, leaving the boy and his mother a small annuity. They had lived in genteel poverty for some years, but Mrs. Wainwright had been quite beautiful, and eventually had met and married General Stanley—himself a widower of many years' standing.

"I believe they were quite happy," his mother had said, dispassionate. "But she died only a few months after the wedding—of the consumption, I believe."

She had been looking thoughtfully into her looking glass as they talked, turning her head this way and that, eyes half-closing in quizzical evaluation.

"You are very beautiful, too, Mother," he'd said, both amused and rather touched by what he took as this unusual evidence of doubt.

"Well, yes," she said frankly, laying down the glass. "For my age, I am remarkably handsome. Though I do think the general values me more for my rude good health than for the fact that I have all my teeth and good skin. He has buried two sickly wives, and found it distressing."

His mother, of course, had buried two husbands—but she didn't mention that, and neither did he.

He asked the usual social questions now—did Wainwright go often to Lady Jonas's salons? Grey had not yet had the pleasure. How did Mr. Wainwright find the company there, by comparison with other such gatherings?—meanwhile thinking that the late Lady Stanley must have been very beautiful indeed, judging by her son.

And I doubt extremely that I am the first man to have noticed that, he thought. Is there anyone ...?

While he hesitated, Percy gave him a direct look and put the question that was in the forefront of his own mind.

"Do you go often? To Lavender House?"

He felt a slight easing, for the asking of the question answered it, so far as he was himself concerned; if Wainwright were in the habit of frequenting Lavender House, he would know that Grey was not.

"No," he said, and smiled again. "I had not visited the place in many years, prior to the occasion when I met you there."

"That was my first—and only—visit," Percy confessed. He looked down into his dish of coffee. "A ... friend sought to introduce me to the company, thinking that I might find some congeniality of persons there."

"And did you?"

Percy Wainwright had long, dark lashes. These lifted slowly, giving Grey the benefit of those warm-sherry eyes, further warmed by a look of amusement.

"Oh, yes," Percy said. "Did you?"

Grey felt blood rise in his face, and lifted his coffee to his mouth, so

that the warmth of the liquid might disguise it.

"The pursuit of ... congeniality was not my purpose," he said carefully, lowering the cup. "I had gone there in order to question the proprietor about a private matter. Still," he added, offhanded, "it would be a foolish man who disregards a pound discovered lying by his foot in the road, only because he was not looking for it." He darted a look at Percy, who laughed in delight.

Suddenly, Grey felt a rush of exhilaration, and could not bear to remain indoors, sitting.

"Shall we go?"

Percy drank off his coffee in a gulp and rose, reaching for his cloak with one hand, even as he set down his cup with the other.

The walls of the Balboa were plastered with trivia for the edification of patrons—the entire series of Mr. Hogarth's "Marriage à la Mode" etchings encircled the room, but were surrounded—and in some cases obscured—by thick flutterings of newspaper broadsheets, personal communiqués, and *Wanted* notices, these advertising a need for everything from six tonnes of pig lead or a shipload of Negroes, to a company director of good name and solid finances who might assume the leadership of a fledgling firm engaging in the sale of gentlemen's necessaries—whether these might include snuffboxes, stockings, or condoms was not made clear.

Glancing casually at the new crop of postings as they made their way to the door, though, Grey's eye caught a familiar name in the headline of a fresh broadsheet. DEATH DISCOVERED, read the large type.

He stopped short, the name *Ffoulkes* leaping out of the smaller newsprint at him.

"What?" Percy had perforce halted, too, and was looking curiously from Grey to the newspaper.

"Nothing. A name I recognized." Grey's elation dimmed a little, though he was too excited to be quelled completely. "Are you familiar with a barrister named Ffoulkes? Melchior Ffoulkes?" he asked Percy.

The latter looked blank and shook his head.

"I am afraid I know no one, much," he said apologetically. "Should I have heard of Mr. Ffoulkes?"

"Not at all." Grey would just as soon have dismissed Ffoulkes from his own mind, but felt obliged to see whether anything of what Hal had told him had made it into the public press. He tossed a silver ha'penny to the proprietor and took the broadsheet, folding it and stuffing it into his pocket. Time enough for such things later.

Outside, the chisping had stopped, but the sky hung low and heavy, and there was a sense of stillness in the air, the earth awaiting more snow. Alone, away from the buzz of the coffeehouse, there was a sudden small sense of intimacy between them.

"I must apologize," Percy said, as they turned toward Hyde Park.

"For what?"

"For my unfortunate gaffe yesterday, in regard to your brother. The general *had* told me that I must not under any circumstance address him as 'Your Grace,' but he had not time to explain why—at the time."

Grey snorted.

"Has he told you since?"

"Not in great detail." Percy glanced at him, curious. "Only that there was a scandal of some sort, and that your brother in consequence has renounced his title."

Grey sighed. Unavoidable, he'd known that. Still, he would have preferred to keep this first meeting for themselves, with no intrusions from either past or present.

"Not exactly," he said. "But something like it."

"Your father was a duke, though?" Wainwright cast him a wary glance.

"He was. Duke of Pardloe." The title felt strange on his tongue; he hadn't spoken it in ... fifteen years? More. So long. He felt an accustomed hollowness of the bone at thought of his father. But if there was to be anything between himself and Percy Wainwright ...

"But your brother is not now Duke of Pardloe?"

Despite himself, Grey smiled, albeit wryly.

"He is. But he will not use the title, nor have it used. Hence the occasional awkwardness." He made a small gesture of apology. "My brother is a very stubborn man."

Wainwright raised one brow, as though to suggest that he thought Melton might not be the only one in the Grey family to display such a trait.

"You need not tell me," he said, though, touching Grey's arm briefly. "I'm sure the matter is a painful one."

"You will hear it sooner or later, and you have some right to know, as you are becoming allied with our family. My father shot himself," Grey said abruptly. Percy blinked, shocked.

"Oh," he said, low-voiced, and touched his arm again, very gently.

"I am so sorry."

"So am I." Grey cleared his throat. "Cold, isn't it?" He pulled on his gloves, and rubbed a hand beneath his nose. "It—you have heard of the Jacobites? And the South Sea Bubble?"

"I have, yes. But what have they to do with each other?" Percy asked, bewildered. Grey felt his lips twitch, not quite a smile.

"Nothing, so far as I know. But they had both to do with the—the scandal."

Gerard Grey, Earl of Melton, had been a clever man. Of an ancient and honorable family, well educated, handsome, wealthy—and of a restless, curious turn of mind. He had also been a very fine soldier.

"My father came to the title as quite a young man, and was not content to potter about on the family estates. He had a good deal of money—my mother brought him more—and when the Old Pretender launched his first invasion in 1715, he raised a regiment, and went to fight for king and country."

The Jacobites were ill-organized and badly equipped; the Old Pretender, James Stuart, had not even made it ashore to lead his troops, but had been left fuming impotently off the coast, stranded by bad weather. The invasion, such as it was, had been easily quashed. The dashing young earl, however, had distinguished himself at Sheriffmuir, emerging a hero.

German George, feeling uneasy on his new throne despite the victory, and wishing to demonstrate to the peers of his realm the advantages of supporting him in military terms, elevated Gerard Grey to the newly created dukedom of Pardloe.

"No money with it, mind, and only a scant village or two in terms of land, but it sounded well," Grey said.

"What—whatever happened?" Percy asked, curiosity overcoming his impeccable manners.

"Well." Grey took a deep breath, thinking where best to begin. He did not want to speak at once about his father, and so began from the other end of the affair.

"My mother's mother was Scottish, you see. Not from the Highlands," he added quickly. "From the Borders, which is quite a different thing."

"Yes, they speak English there, do they not?" Wainwright nodded, a small frown of concentration between his brows.

"I expect that is a matter of opinion," Grey said. It had taken him weeks to become sufficiently accustomed to the hideous accents of his

Scottish cousins as to easily understand what they were saying.

"But at least they are not barbarians, such as the Highland Scots. Nor did the Borderers join in the Catholic Rising—most being strongly Protestant, and having no particular sympathy or common interest with either the Stuarts or the Highland clans."

"I suppose, though, that many Englishmen do not make distinctions between one Scot and another?" Percy said, with some delicacy.

Grey gave a small grimace of acknowledgment.

"It did not help that one of my mother's uncles and his sons *did* openly support the Stuart cause. For the sake of profit," he added, with slight distaste, "not religion."

"Is that better or worse?" Percy asked, a half smile taking any sting from the words.

"Not much to choose," Grey admitted. "And before the thing was finished, a good many more of my mother's family were embroiled. If not actually known Jacobites, certainly tainted by the association."

"I see." Wainwright's brows were high with interest. "You mentioned your father's involvement with the South Sea Bubble. Do we assume that this had something to do with your profit-minded great-uncle?"

Grey glanced at him, surprised at the quickness of his mind.

"Yes," he said. "Great-Uncle Nicodemus. Nicodemus Patricius Marcus Armstrong."

Percy made a small, muffled noise.

"There is a reason why I was christened 'John,' and that my brothers have such relatively common names as Paul, Edgar, and Harold," Grey said wryly. "The names on my mother's side of the family ..." He shook his head, and resumed his account.

"My father invested a substantial sum with a certain company—the South Sea—upon the urgings of Uncle Nick, after Sheriffmuir. Mind you, this was some years before the collapse; at the time, it seemed no more than a somewhat risky venture. And it appealed, I think, to my father's sense of adventure, which was acute." He couldn't help a brief smile at thought of some of those adventures.

"It was a substantial sum, but by no means a significant part of my father's property. He was therefore content to leave it, depending upon Uncle Nick to watch the business, whilst he devoted himself to other, more interesting ventures. But then the Jacobite threat—" He paused, glancing at Percy.

"How old are you, if you will pardon my asking?"

Percy blinked at that, but smiled.

"Twenty-six. Why?"

"Ah. You may be old enough, then, to recall the atmosphere of suspicion and hysteria regarding Jacobites during the '45?"

Percy shook his head.

"No," he said ruefully. "My father was a clergyman, who viewed the world and its affairs as nothing more than a threat to the souls of the godly. We heard little news, and would have taken no heed of political rumors in any case—the only king of any importance being the Lord, so far as my father was concerned. But that's of no consequence," he added hastily. "Go on, please."

"I was going to say that that hysteria, great as it was, was no more than an echo of what happened earlier. Are you content to walk, by the way? We could easily take a carriage." The weather had grown sharply colder, and a bone-cutting breeze swept through the alleyways. Percy was lightly dressed for the temperature, but he shook his head.

"No, I prefer to walk. It's much easier to talk—if you wish to do that," he added, a little shyly.

Grey wasn't at all sure that he wished to do that—his offer of a carriage had been based as much on a sudden desire to abandon the conversation for the moment as on a desire to save Mr. Wainwright from a chilled liver. But he'd meant it; Wainwright had a right to know, and might better hear the details from him than from someone who held the late duke in less esteem.

"Well. You will know, I suppose, that raising, equipping, and maintaining a regiment is an expensive business. My father had money, as I said, but in order to expand the regiment when the Jacobite threat recurred in 1719, he sold his South Sea shares—quite against the advice of Great-Uncle Nicodemus, I might add."

Within the previous five years, the price of South Sea shares had risen, from ten pounds to a hundred, then dizzyingly, from a hundred to a thousand within a year, driven up by rumor, greed—and not a little calculated chicanery on the part of the company's directors. The duke sold his shares at this pinnacle.

"And a week—one week—later, the slide began." It had taken most of a year for the full devastation of the great crash to become evident. Several great families had been ruined; many lesser folk all but obliterated. And the public outcry toward those seen to be responsible ...

"I can imagine." Percy glanced at him. He wore no hat, and the tips of his ears were red with cold. "But your father was *not* responsible, was he?"

Grey shook his head.

"He was seen to profit immensely, while others went bankrupt," he said simply. "Nothing else was needed to convict him in the popular mind." And the House of Commons, that voice of the popular mind, had been vociferous in their denunciations.

"But he was a duke." Grey watched the words purl out, his breath like smoke. "He could not be tried, save by his peers. And the House of Lords declined to proceed." Not from any sense of justice—many noble families had suffered in the crash and were quite as irrationally bloodthirsty as the commoners. But the Duke of Pardloe chose his friends carefully, and the ravenings of the mob moved on to easier prey.

"Such things leave a mark, though. Enemies were made, enmities lingered. And it was the more unfortunate that my father should have been a good friend of Francis Atterbury's. The Bishop of Rochester," he added, seeing Percy's puzzled look. "Convicted of being the focus of a Jacobite plot to exploit public feeling about the South Sea Bubble by staging a Stuart invasion and dethroning the king, in '22. Banished, though, not executed."

Their path had led them to Hyde Park, for the most direct way to Lady Jonas's house lay straight across it. They were now well within the park, and Grey gestured to the wide spaces all around them, empty and desolate.

"When word got out of the plot in '22, His Majesty in panic ordered ten thousand troops to London, to safeguard the city. They were quartered here—in the park. My father told me of it; he said the smoke of their fires was thicker than the morning fog, and the stench was indescribable. Convenient, though; the family house stands on the edge of the park—just beyond those trees." He gestured toward it, with a brief smile at the memory, then went on.

"My father merely played chess with the bishop; he had no Jacobite leanings whatever. But again—"

"The popular mind." Percy nodded. "And your mother's family. So he was perceived as a Jacobite sympathizer? The notion being that he had somehow engineered the crash in order to facilitate the invasion—though it never happened?"

Grey nodded, a sense of hollowness growing beneath his

breastbone. He had never told the story to anyone before, and was both surprised and disturbed that the words came so easily to him. He was coming now to the most difficult part of the history, though, and so hesitated.

"There was another Jacobite scare, a decade later—this one no more, really, than talk. Lord Cornbury it was, who was the instigator. No one would have noticed, really, save he was the Earl of Clarendon's heir. And it came to nothing in the end; Cornbury was not even imprisoned—merely left off meddling in politics." He smiled again, though without humor.

Percy's lower teeth were fixed in his upper lip. He shook his head slowly.

"Don't tell me. Cornbury was also an intimate of your father's?"

"Ah—no. My mother." He gave Percy a wry glance. "Or rather, Cornbury had been a close friend to her first husband. Thus Cornbury is my eldest half brother's godfather. Not a close connexion, by any means—but it was a connexion, and it didn't help when the rumors about another Stuart Rising began in 1740."

He took a breath and released it slowly, watching the steam of it.

"There were ... other Jacobite influences. My mother's family, as you say. And then—one of my father's nearest friends was exposed as a Jacobite plotter, and arrested. The man was taken to the Tower and questioned closely—I do not know whether that is a euphemism for torture; it was not said—but under the pressure of such questioning, he revealed a number of names. Persons, it was claimed, who were involved in a direct plot to assassinate the king and his family."

Speaking these words now, from the far side of Culloden, the idea seemed preposterous. He thought it had perhaps seemed equally ludicrous to his parents—at first.

"He—this Jacobite plotter—incriminated your father?"

Grey nodded, somewhat comforted to see that Percy looked both aghast and incredulous at this.

"Yes. There was no direct evidence—or at least none was ever produced. But the matter did not come to trial. A warrant was issued for my father's arrest. He ... died—the night before it was to be executed."

"Oh, dear God," Percy said, very quietly. He did not touch Grey again, but drew closer, walking slowly, so that their shoulders nearly brushed.

"Of course," Percy said after a moment, "your father's death was

taken as an admission of guilt?" He put the question delicately, but remembered bitterness filled Grey's throat with the taste of bile.

"It was. A Bill of Attainder was brought against my father's title, but did not pass." He smiled wryly.

"My father had many enemies, but just as many friends. And a much better instinct in choosing godfathers for his sons than my mother's first husband. Hal's godfather was Robert Walpole."

"What, the prime minister?" Percy looked gratifyingly agog.

"Well, he wasn't at the time of Hal's birth, of course. And when the scandal broke, twenty-some years later, Walpole was very near his own death—but still an immensely powerful man.

"And," Grey added judiciously, "whatever his personal feelings in the matter, it wouldn't have done Walpole's own reputation any good to have his godson's father publicly denounced as a traitor. Not at such a delicate point in his own affairs.

"So," he concluded, "the Bill of Attainder was quashed. My father had not, after all, been proved a traitor. There was sufficient public—and private—outcry, though, that Hal declared he would not bear a tainted title, and has ever since refused to use it. He did wish to renounce it completely, but could not by law."

He gave a short laugh.

"So. A very long story, I am afraid—but we do arrive at the end, never fear."

Within two or three years of the duke's death, Charles Edward Stuart had begun to make a nuisance of himself, and Jacobite hysteria had once more swept the country, rising to a peak upon the Bonnie Prince's arrival in the Highlands.

"Whereupon Hal promptly raised the standard of our father's old regiment, spent a fortune in reconstituting it, and marched off to the Highlands in the service of the king. The king was in no position to refuse such service, any more than his father had been when my father did the same thing thirty years before."

He said nothing of the immensity of Hal's effort. At the time, he had been barely fifteen and ignorant, not only of the true dimensions of the scandal, but of his brother's response to it. Only now, looking back, could he appreciate the tremendous energy and almost maniacal single-mindedness that had enabled Hal to do what he'd done.

Melton, grimly intent upon restoring the family's lost honor, had met the Highlanders—and defeat—with Cope at Prestonpans. Went on to hold his own in the less decisive battle at Falkirk—and then at Culloden ...

Grey's voice dried in his throat, and he paused, mouth working to find a little saliva.

"A famous victory!" Percy said, his voice respectful. "I read of that, at least, in the newspapers."

"I hope you never see one like it," Grey said shortly. He curled his left hand into a fist, feeling Hector's sapphire ring press against the leather of his glove. Hector had died at Culloden. But he did not mean to speak of Hector.

Percy glanced at him, surprised by his tone, but did not reply. Grey breathed deeply, the air cold and heavy in his chest. They had been walking slowly, but had come through the park and were now within sight of Lady Jonas's house; he could see guests coming in ones and twos, being welcomed at the door by the butler.

With unspoken consent, they stopped, a little way down the street. Wainwright turned to face him, his eyes still warm, but serious.

"Your mother does not style herself Duchess?" he asked, and Grey shook his head.

"My brother became head of the family at my father's death; she would do nothing that might seem to undermine his authority. She uses the title Dowager Countess of Melton."

"I see." Wainwright studied Grey with open curiosity. "And yet you have continued to call yourself ..."

"Lord John. Yes, I have."

The corner of Wainwright's mouth tucked back.

"I see that your brother is not alone in being stubborn."

"It runs in the family," Grey replied. "Shall we go in?"

Chapter 5



Genius and Sub-Genius

Grey noted at once that Percy was not entirely comfortable.

His color was high, and while he handed his cloak to the butler with aplomb, he looked quickly round the drawing room to which they were taken, as though searching for acquaintance, then glanced back at Grey uncertainly. His face brightened, though, as he spotted their hostess, and he hastened forward, Grey in his wake.

He bowed to Lady Jonas, and introduced Grey to her; she greeted them kindly, but with that air of distraction that attends a hostess in search of more-distinguished guests. They kissed her hand in turn and retired to the drinks table.

"You don't do this often, do you?" Grey murmured to Percy.

"Does it show?" Wainwright cast him a glance of half-comic alarm, and he laughed.

"Not at all," he assured Percy. "It is only that no one save Lady Jonas has spoken to you since we entered. How do you come to know her?"

Wainwright shrugged a little, looking embarrassed.

"She stepped on my foot at a ball. At Sir Richard Joffrey's house—the general had taken me there to meet Colonel Quarry. But Lady Jonas apologized most gracefully, asked my name—she knew the general, of course—and ended by inviting me to her salon, with any friend I might choose to bring. She said"—Percy blushed, avoiding Grey's eye—"that beautiful boys were always welcome."

"I have found that generally to be the case in society," Grey said, tactfully ignoring both the blush and the implied compliment. "Regardless of sex." He nodded at the Honorable Helene Rowbotham, whose swanlike neck and doelike eyes were exciting their usual admiration near the window where she had placed herself so as to take best advantage of the pale winter sun.

"On the other hand," he said lightly, "a party at which the guests are all of the beautiful persuasion tends to be dull indeed, as they have no conversation that does not pertain to themselves. A successful gathering requires a number of the ill-favored but clever. The beautiful are but ornaments—desirable, but dispensable."

"Indeed," Percy said dryly. "And in which camp do you place yourself here? Beautiful and dull, or homely and clever?"

"Oh," Grey said lightly, and touched Percy's wrist, "I'll be wherever you are ... Brother."

The blush, which had receded, surged back full force. Wainwright had no chance to reply, though, before Grey perceived Lady Beverley drifting toward them, an intentness in her eye at sight of Percy.

"Light-frigate off the starboard bow," he said under his breath. Percy frowned in bewilderment, but then saw the direction of his glance.

"Really? She looks most respectable," Percy murmured, he having evidently spent enough time with General Stanley in military circles as to have acquired familiarity with such terms as "light-frigate" for a woman of easy virtue.

"Don't go into an alcove with her," Grey murmured back, already nodding and smiling at the approaching lady. "She'll have her hand in your breeches before you can say—Lady Beverley! Your servant, madam—may I present you my new stepbrother, Percival Wainwright?"

Seeing the hint of hesitation in Percy's eye, he grasped Lady Beverley's trailing hand and kissed it, thus signaling to Percy that, yes, she *was* married, reputation notwithstanding, then gracefully relinquished the appendage to Wainwright for the bestowal of his own homage.

"Mr. Wainwright." Lady Beverley gave him a look of approval, then turned the force of her not inconsiderable charm on Grey. "We are obliged to you, Lord John! Monstrous kind of you, to bring such an ornament to decorate our dull society. Do come and have a glass of punch with me, Mr. Wainwright, and tell me what you think of Mr. Garrick's new role—you will have seen it, I'm sure. For myself ..."

Before either man could draw breath to answer, she had got Percy's hand firmly trapped between her elbow and her yellow silk bodice, and was towing him purposefully toward the refreshment table, still talking.

Wainwright cast Grey a wide-eyed look, and Grey sketched a small salute in return, suppressing a smile. At least Wainwright had been warned. And if he took care to keep Lady Beverley out in the public view, she would be good company. Already she had drawn him into the circle around the guest of honor, which she cleft like the Red Sea, and was introducing him to the French philosopher.

He relaxed a bit, seeing that Percy seemed able to hold his own, and deliberately turned his back, not to embarrass his new relation with undue scrutiny.

"Lord John!" A clear voice hailed him, and he looked round to find his friend Lucinda, Lady Joffrey, smiling at him, a small leather-bound book in one hand. "How do you do, my dear?"

"Excellently well, I thank you." He made to kiss her hand, but she laughed and drew him in, standing on tiptoe to kiss his cheek instead.

"I crave a favor, if you please," she whispered in his ear, and came down on her heels, looking up at him, expectant of his consent.

"You know I can deny you nothing," he said, smiling. She reminded him always of a partridge, small, neat, and slightly plump, with a kind, soft eye. "What is your desire, Lady Joffrey? A cup of punch? Sardines on toast? Or had you in mind something more in the way of apes, ivory, and peacocks?"

"It may well be pearls before swine," she said, dimpling, and handed him the book. "But the fact of the matter is that I have a ... relation ... who has written some verses—negligible, I am sure, but perhaps not without a certain charm. I thought to present them to Monsieur Diderot ..." She cast a glance toward the window where the distinguished man of letters held court, then turned back, a faint blush mantling her cheeks.

"But I find my nerve fails me."

Grey gave her a look of patent disbelief. Small and demure she might be in appearance; by temperament she had the guile of a serpent and the tenacity of a sticking plaster.

"Really," she insisted, both dimple and blush growing deeper. She glanced round to be sure they were not overheard, and leaning close, whispered, "Have you by chance heard of a novel entitled *Les Bijoux Indiscrets*?"

"I have, Lady Joffrey," he said, with mock severity, "and I am shocked to the core of my being to discover that a woman of your character should be acquainted with such a scandalous volume. Have you read it?" he inquired, dropping the pose.

"La, everyone's read it," she said, relaxing into comfortable scorn. "Your mother sent it to me last year."

"Indeed." He was not surprised; his mother would read anything, and maintained friendships with several similarly indiscriminate ladies, who kept up a constant exchange of books—most of which would have shocked their husbands, had those worthy gentlemen ever

bothered to inquire about their wives' pastimes.

"Have you read it?" she asked.

He shook his head. *Les Bijoux Indiscrets* was an erotic novel, written some years before by M. Diderot for Madeleine le Puisieux, his mistress at the time. It had been published in Holland, and for a time, there had been a mania in England for smuggled copies. He'd seen the book, of course, but had done no more than flip through an illustrated copy, looking for the pictures—which were indifferently executed. Perhaps the text was better.

"Prude," she said.

"Quite. Am I to infer that these ... verses ... share something of the sentiments of that particular volume?" He weighed the book in his hand. It was both small and slender, befitting poetry.

"I believe they were inspired by certain of the events depicted therein," Lady Joffrey said, circumspect. "The, um, author of the verses wished to present them to Monsieur Diderot as an acknowledgment of the inspiration, I believe—a tribute, if you will."

He raised a brow at her, and opened the cover. *Certain Verses Upon the Subject of*—

"Jesus," he said, involuntarily, and shut the book. He immediately opened it again, cautiously, as though afraid it might spit at him.

By an Admirer of the Works of that Urgent Genius, Monsieur Denis Diderot, who in Humility stiles himself "Sub-Genius."

"You didn't write them yourself, did you?" he asked, glancing up. Lady Joffrey's mouth fell open, and he smiled. "No, of course not. My apologies."

He thumbed slowly through the book, pausing to read here and there. The verses were actually quite competent, he thought—even good, in spots. Though the material ...

"Yes," he said, closing the book and clearing his throat. "I see why you might hesitate to present this personally—he *is* a Frenchman, though I believe he's said to be quite faithful to his present mistress. I suppose you hadn't looked at the contents before coming here?"

She shook her head, making the pheasant's feathers she wore in her powdered hair sweep across her shoulder.

"No. He—the relation I spoke of—had brought it to me early in the week, but I'd had no chance to look at it. I read it in the carriage on the way—and then, of course, was at a loss what to do, until most fortunately I saw you." She looked over her shoulder at the group by the window, then back at Grey. "I did promise to deliver it. Will you?

Please?"

"I don't know why your husband does not beat you regularly," he remarked, shaking his head. "Or at least keep you locked up safely at home. Has he the slightest idea ...?"

"Sir Richard is a most accomplished diplomat," she replied with complacence. "He has a great facility for not knowing things that it is expedient not to know."

"I daresay," Grey replied dryly. "Speaking of knowing—do I know your relation?"

"Why, I am sure I could not say, I have so many," she answered blandly. "But speaking of relations—I hear that you are to acquire a new brother? I am told that he is amazing handsome to look at."

Hearing Percival Wainwright referred to as his brother gave him a slightly odd feeling, as though he might in fact be contemplating incest. He ignored this, though, and nodded toward the table.

"You may judge of that for yourself; there he stands."

Wainwright had moved away from the throng around the philosopher, and was now surrounded, Grey was pleased to see, by a small group of his own, both men and women, all seeming much amused by his conversation—particularly Lady Beverley, who hung upon both his words and his arm. Wainwright was telling some story, his face alight, and even across the room, Grey felt the warmth of his presence. As though he sensed their scrutiny, Percy glanced suddenly in their direction, and shot Grey a smile of such delight in his surroundings that Grey smiled back, delighted in turn to see him manage so well.

Lucinda Joffrey emitted a hum of approval.

"Oh, yes," she said. "And quite good style, too. Did you dress him?" she inquired.

No, but I should like very much to undress him. He cleared his throat.

"No, he has excellent taste of his own."

"And the money to support it?"

He was not offended. A man's means were generally of more interest than his face, and everyone would be wondering the same thing of a newcomer—though not everyone would ask so bluntly. Lucinda, though, *did* have a great many relations, of whom at least half were female, and felt it her moral duty to help her sisters and cousins to good marriages.

"Unfortunately not. His father—you collect he is the general's

stepson?—was a minister of some kind. Family poor as church mice, I gather. The general has settled a small sum upon him, but he has no property."

Lucinda hummed again, but with less approval.

"Looking for a rich wife, then, is he?" she said, with a degree of resignation. She came from an old and estimable family, but one without wealth.

"Early days for that, surely." Grey thought he had spoken lightly, but she gave him a sharp look.

"Ho," she said. "Does he fancy himself in love with someone unsuitable?"

Grey felt as though she had pushed him suddenly in the chest. He had forgotten just how acute she was. Sir Richard Joffrey was indeed a good diplomat—but no little degree of his success was the result of his wife's social connexions and her ability to ferret out things that it was expedient to know.

"If so, he has not told me," Grey said, achieving, he thought, a good simulation of indifference. "Have you met the great man yourself? Will I present you?"

"Oh, Monsieur Diderot?" Lucinda turned to eye the guest of honor speculatively. "I did meet him, some years ago in Paris. A very witty man, though I think I should not care to be married to him."

"Because he keeps a mistress?"

She looked surprised, then waved her fan in dismissal.

"Oh, no. The difficulty with witty people is that they feel compelled to exhibit their wit *all the time*—which is most tedious over the breakfast table. Sir Richard," she said with satisfaction, "is not witty at all."

"I suppose it wouldn't do in a diplomat," Grey agreed. "Will I fetch you some refreshment?"

Lady Joffrey assenting, he made his way through the crowd, the book she had given him still in hand. The room buzzed with conversation and the excitement of a successful salon, but a freak of sound brought him Diderot's voice clearly—nasal, like all Frenchmen, but rich and pleasant. He seemed to be speaking of his wife.

"She has conceived the idea, you see, that all novels are vulgar trash, and desires me to read to her only material of a spiritually uplifting sort—commentaries upon the Bible, the works of—haha!—Burke and the like."

A number of his listeners laughed with him, though Edmund Burke

was popular.

"So," the warm voice went on, audibly amused, "I have taken to reading her the most ribald stories I can obtain. The value of the lesson is thereby doubled, as she not only hears the stories, but then reports every detail again in horror to her friends!"

A gust of laughter resulted from that, obliging Grey to signal his desire to the servant at the refreshment table, who nodded understanding and gave him a silver cup of punch and a small plate of savories. Balancing these with the book of poetry, he made his way back across the room, only to find Lucinda Joffrey already supplied with refreshment by a new escort, whom he recognized as an influential Member of Parliament.

Lucinda flicked a glance at him over the MP's shoulder, and made a slight gesture with her fan, which he interpreted as a signal that she was engaged in confidential transaction. He nodded understanding and retreated to a convenient window ledge, where he sat in the shelter of the damask draperies and consumed the savories himself with enjoyment, meanwhile observing the ebb and flow of society.

He had not been in the London tide for some time, and found it pleasant to sit and hear the grossest trivialities mingled with the loftiest of philosophical ideas, and to watch the social commerce being conducted under his nose—matches made and unmade, business connexions forged and uncoupled, favors given, acknowledged, and traded. And politics, of course—always politics—talked to death amidst expressions of outrage or approbation, depending upon the company.

And yet he knew there was real power here, could feel the pulse of it throbbing beneath the chatter and clothes. For most of those present, such salons were what they seemed: a source of entertainment at worst, at best a chance to be seen, perhaps to be taken up and made the vogue of the moment. But in the quiet corners, things were said that had the potential to alter lives—perhaps to affect the course of history.

Was it in such places that his own parents' fates had been sealed? It was at an evening musicale that his mother, a young widow, had been introduced to his father, he knew. Why had he been there? Gerard Grey had no ear for music. Had he come for the sake of politics and met love unaware? Or had his mother been part of it, even then?

He'd heard the story of his parents' meeting often as a child; it had been at her brother's house. His mother had three brothers, and a great quantity of ill-defined cousins, half cousins, and persons who were no blood relation but held the status of brothers, having been fostered by the family in that peculiar custom of the Scottish aristocracy.

One uncle was dead now, another living in exile in France. The third had retreated to his Border fortress, far from the public eye. Some cousins had survived the scandal, others had not. Politics was a risky game, and the stakes were high—sometimes mortal.

He felt the shiver of a goose crossing his grave, and shook it off, quaffing the punch in one swallow. He hadn't thought of these things in years, deliberately. But it was his family history; Percy should be told, as much for his own safety as anything else, if he was to move in society—and plainly he wished to. If there was a public connexion between himself and Grey ... Some people had long memories.

He scanned the faces of the crowd, but luckily saw no one against whom Percy need be warned just yet.

Rising from his hiding place, he nearly collided with Diderot, heading purposefully for the *pissoirs* behind the screen at the end of the room.

"Your pardon, *Monsieur*." They had clutched each other's arms to keep their feet, smiled and spoke together, then laughed.

The philosopher's face gleamed with sweat, and he mopped carelessly at his forehead with a sleeve. Grey pulled his handkerchief from his pocket to offer it, and felt something fall at his feet.

"Ah." He stooped to pick it up. "Permettez-moi, Monsieur. Un petit cadeau—pour Madame votre épouse."

Diderot's brows rose a little as he accepted both handkerchief and book; he dabbed absently at his cheeks as he flipped open the book with his thumb, read the title page, and broke into a most infectious grin, no less charming for a missing tooth.

"Your servant, sir," he said. "My wife will be *most* obliged to you, *Monsieur*!" With a wave of the hand, he strode off, the open book still in his hand, and a moment later, wild peals of laughter came from behind the ornamental screen.

Heads were beginning to turn in Grey's direction, and he realized that Percy Wainwright had come up beside him, looking curious.

"Whatever did you give him?"

"Ah ..." It dawned upon Grey that in his haste to accomplish his errand, he had neglected to inform M. Diderot that he was not himself the author of the verses, which were at the moment causing a murmur

of baffled amusement to sweep through the room, people sniggering faintly from sympathy, though quite ignorant of the cause.

He could not in countenance join M. Diderot to explain, not with all eyes fixed upon that end of the room—Diderot was now loudly declaiming one of the verses, evidently for the edification of another gentleman whose head Grey briefly glimpsed above the edge of the screen. Ripples of outright laughter were running through the room, and Grey caught sight of Lucinda Joffrey, open fan pressed over her mouth, eyes wide in what might be hilarity or horror. He didn't wish to find out which.

"Let's go." He seized Percy by the arm, and with the barest of bows to Lady Jonas, they made a hurried escape.



Outside, it had begun to snow in earnest. They stopped, breathless, to struggle into their greatcoats and cloaks in the shelter of the trees at the edge of Hyde Park.

"I had no idea, Lord John." Percy Wainwright was red-cheeked with cold and laughter. "I knew you for a man of wit, but not of letters. The subject matter, though ..."

"You cannot possibly think I wrote that! And for God's sake, call me John," he added.

Percy looked at him, snow spangling his dark hair—for he had lost most of his powder in the heat and crush of the salon—and gave him a smile of surpassing sweetness.

"John, then," he said softly.

It was well on to evening. Candlelight glowed from the windows of the houses across the street, and the air was full of mystery and excitement, white flakes pelting down in utter silence, so quickly hiding the cobbled streets and leafless trees and the commonplace filth of London. Despite the cold, he felt warmth pulsing through him; did it show? Grey wondered.

"It is early," he said, looking down as he brushed a few flakes of snow from his hat. "What would you say to a supper at the Beefsteak, perhaps a hand or two of cards? Or if you are so inclined, there is a new play ..."

Glancing shyly up, he saw Percy's face fall.

"I should like it of all things. But the general has engaged us to dine

with Colonel Benham; I cannot beg off, as it is on my account."

"No, of course," Grey said hurriedly, unreasonably disappointed. "Another time—"

"Tomorrow?" Percy's eyes met his, direct. "Perhaps ... in my rooms? I live very plainly, I fear. Still, it is ..." Grey saw Percy's throat move as he swallowed. "It is ... quiet. Our conversation would be undisturbed."

The generalized warmth Grey had been feeling coalesced quite suddenly, low in his abdomen.

"That would be—oh, damn!"

"You have suddenly recalled another engagement?" Percy cocked a brow, with a crooked smile. "I am not surprised; I should imagine you are in great demand, socially."

"Hardly that," Grey assured him. "No, it's only that I must leave in the morning for the Lake District. The funeral of a—of a friend." Even as he said it, he was thinking how he might delay his departure—surely a day would make no difference? He might make up the time on the road.

He wanted very urgently to stay; imagined that he could feel the heat of Percy's body, even across the space of snowy air between them. And yet ... better, surely, if they had time. This was not some stranger—or rather, he was, but a stranger who was about to become part of Grey's family, and whom he hoped might be a friend; not some attractive, anonymous body whom he would never see again. He wished very much to do the thing—but even more, to do it properly.

"I must go," he repeated, reluctantly. "I regret it exceedingly. But I will, of course, be back in good time for the wedding."

Percy looked searchingly at him for a moment, then gave him the faintest smile and lifted his hand. His bare fingers touched Grey's cheek, cold and fleeting.

"Godspeed, then," he said. "John."



Could be worse, he reflected. Percy Wainwright's unavailability meant that his own evening was free. Which in turn meant that he could go and beard Hal now, rather than in the morning, and thus not delay his departure for Helwater. If the snow kept pelting down like this, he might not make it out of London in any case.

He turned into the park, head bent against the blowing snow. Lady Jonas's house lay near the parade ground, just past the Grosvenor Gate, while the Greys' family manor, Argus House, was nearly diagonal from it, on the edge of the park near the barracks. It was nearly a mile across open ground, without the shelter of buildings to break the wind, but faster than going round by the road. And his blood was sufficiently warm with wine and excitement as to save him freezing to death.

The memory of the pleasure of Percy Wainwright's company—and speculations based on the furtherance of their acquaintance—were nearly enough to distract him from the prospect of the impending conversation with Hal—but not quite.

Reliving the old scandals leading to his father's death for Percy had been painful, but in the way that lancing an abscess is painful; he felt surprisingly the better for it. Only with the lancing did he realize how deeply and how long the thing had festered in him.

The feeling of relief now emboldened him. He was no longer a twelve-year-old boy, after all, to be protected or lied to for his own good. Whatever secret was sticking in Hal's craw now, he could bloody well cough it up.

The scent of smoke cut through the air, acrid and heartening with its promise of heat. Surprised, he looked for the source, and made out a faint glow in the gathering dark. There were few people in the park —most of the poor who scraped a living begging or stealing near the park had gone to shelter in alleyways and night cellars, crowding into filthy boozing kens or garrets if they had a penny to spare, huddling in church porches or under walls if they had not. But who in his right mind would camp in the open during a snowstorm?

He altered his path enough to investigate, and found the glow came from a clay firepot burning in the lee of a crude lean-to, propped against a tree. The lean-to was deserted—was, in fact, too small to shelter anything larger than a dog. He had no more than an instant to think this odd, when instinct made him turn and look behind.

There were two of them, one with a club, the other unarmed.

Stocky shapes, black and ragged, hunched under split burlap sacks that covered heads and shoulders, hiding their faces.

"Stand and deliver!" said a hoarse Irish voice.

"Else we squash yer head in like a rotten turnip!" said another just like it.

He hadn't worn a sword to the salon. He did have his accustomed

dagger, though, worn beneath his waistcoat.

"Bugger off," he said briefly, unbuttoning his coat and producing this. He made small circles with the blade, the metal gleaming dull in what little light there was.

A dagger was not the weapon of choice when facing someone armed with a club, but it was what he had. He backed slowly, jabbing the blade at them, hoping to acquire enough distance to turn and run before they charged him.

To his surprise, they seemed turned to stone at his words.

"It's him, so 'tis!" one of them hissed to the other. "The major!"

"O'Higgins?" he said, straightening in disbelief. "O'Higgins!" he bellowed. But they had fled, uttering Irish blasphemies that floated back to him through the snow.

He replaced the dagger and rebuttoned his greatcoat, fumbling a bit, his fingers shaking a little from the shock of the encounter.

The bloody O'Higgins brothers. Grossly misnamed by their pious mother for a pair of archangels, their baptismal names of Raphael and Michael shortened for common use to Rafe and Mick. Not twins, but so similar in appearance that they often masqueraded as each other in order to escape trouble. And worked in concert to get into it.

He was morally sure they were deserters from the Irish Brigade, but the recruiting sergeant had given them their shillings and their uniforms before Grey had set eyes on them. They weren't the worst of soldiers, though given to more alarming varieties of free enterprise than most.

He squinted through the gloom in the direction they had taken. Sure enough, Hyde Park barracks lay that way, though he couldn't see the buildings through the trees, dark as it was by now. At a guess, the O'Higginses had come to dice and drink with friends quartered there —or to attend some social event such as a cockfight—and realizing a sudden need for cash, had improvised in their usual slipshod but imaginative manner.

Shaking his head, he kicked the firepot over and scattered the glowing coals, which hissed red and died in the snow. He'd deal with the O'Higginses in the morning.

By the time he reached the Serpentine road, he was thickly plastered with snow, his blood had chilled appreciably, and he was beginning to regret not having picked the firepot up and taken it with him, the detriment to his appearance notwithstanding. Despite his gloves, his fingers had gone numb, as had his face, and the stiffness of

his cheeks reminded him of the man lying on the pavement outside White's the night before.

The royal swan-keepers had removed the swans for the winter, and the lake was frozen, but not so hard that he would trust his weight to it. Covered with snow, soft patches would be invisible, and all he needed now was to crash through the ice and be submerged in freezing water and decaying duckweed. Sighing, he turned left to make his way round the lake.

Well, perhaps he would remember to ask Hal whether the man's identity and fate had been determined, once the other matter was settled. And while he was asking ... the events of the afternoon had almost made him forget his mother's odd behavior at breakfast. In the shock of learning of Geneva's death, he had not at once thought of connecting her reaction to the mention of Jamie Fraser with the appearance of the journal page in Hal's office, but from his present perspective, it seemed not only likely, but probable.

Had Hal spoken to her already, then? If he had come to Jermyn Street, he had done so very surreptitiously, either late the night before or very early in the morning. No. Not late, or Grey, stewing by his window, would have seen him. And not early; his mother had been in her wrapper at breakfast, blinking and yawning as was her morning habit, clearly fresh from her bed.

Another thought struck him; perhaps his mother had also received a page from his father's missing journal? Perhaps in the morning post? He slowed a little, boots beginning to crunch in the inch of snow that now covered the ground. Had she opened another letter, after the one from Lady Dunsany? He could not remember; his attention had been focused on Olivia.

The thought of another page filled him with simultaneous alarm and excitement. It would account for his mother's sudden agitation, and her violent reaction to the mention of his Jacobite prisoner. And if such a thing *had* arrived this morning, Hal likely didn't know about it yet.

A surge of blood burnt his frozen cheeks. He brushed away the flakes that clung melting to his lashes, and strode through the deepening snow with renewed determination.



He was the more startled and discomfited to be greeted at the door by Hal's butler with the news that his brother had gone to Bath.

"He really has," his sister-in-law assured him, appearing behind the butler. She dimpled at his upraised eyebrow, and flung out a hand to indicate the hall behind her. "Search the house, if you like."

"What the devil has he gone to Bath for?" Grey demanded irritably. "In *this* weather?"

"He didn't tell me," Minnie said equably. "Do come in, John. You look like a snowman, and you must be wet to the skin."

"No, I thank you. I must—"

"You must come in and take supper," she said firmly. "Your nephews miss their uncle John. And your stomach is grumbling; I can hear it from here."

It was, and he surrendered his wet outer garments to the butler with more gratitude than he cared to show.

Supper was delayed for a bit, though, in favor of a visit to the nursery. Six-year-old Benjamin and five-year-old Adam were so raucously pleased to see their uncle that three-year-old Henry was roused from sleep and shrieked to join the fun. Half an hour of playing knights and dragon—Grey was allowed to be the dragon, which let him roar and breathe fire, but compelled him to die ignominiously on the hearthrug, stabbed through the heart with a ruler—left him in much better temper, but monstrously hungry.

"You are an angel, Minerva," he said, closing his eyes in order better to appreciate the savory steam rising from the slice of fish pie set in front of him.

"You won't think so if you call me Minerva again," she told him, taking her own slice. "I've a nice Rhenish to go with that—or will you rather like a French wine?"

Grey's mouth was full of fish pie, but he did his best to indicate with his eyebrows that he would be pleased to drink whatever she chose. She laughed, and sent the butler to bring both.

Obviously accustomed to men's needs, she didn't trouble him with conversation until he had finished the fish pie, a plate of cold ham with pickled onions and gherkins, some excellent cheese, and a large helping of treacle pudding, followed by coffee.

"Minnie, you have saved my life," he said, after his first sip of the fragrant hot black stuff. "I am your most devoted servant."

"Are you? Oh, good. Now," she said, sitting back with an expression of pleased command, "you may tell me everything."

"Everything?"

"Everything," she said firmly. "I haven't been out of the house in a month, your mother and Olivia are too taken up with wedding preparations to visit, and your wretched brother tells me nothing whatever."

"He doesn't?" Grey was surprised at that. Minnie was Hal's second wife—acquired after a decade of widowerhood—and he had always thought the marriage a close one.

"Your brother does, of course, speak to me on occasion," she admitted, with a small gleam of amusement. "But he subscribes to the peculiar notion that expectant women must be exposed to nothing in the least stimulating. I haven't heard any decent gossip in weeks, and he hides the newspapers—fearing, no doubt, that I will read some lurid confessional from Tyburn Hill, and the child be born with a noose round its neck."

Grey laughed—though with the belated memory of the broadsheet in his coat pocket, felt that his brother might be well advised in the matter of newspapers, at least. He obligingly recounted his experiences at Lady Jonas's salon, though, including the incident of the Sub-Genius's book of verse, which made Minnie laugh so hard that she choked on her coffee and was obliged to be pounded on the back by the butler.

"Never fear," she said, wiping her eyes on her napkin. "I shall worm the author's identity out of Lucinda Joffrey, when next I see her, and let you know. So, you went with the new brother, did you? What is he like?"

"Oh ... very pleasant. Well bred, well spoken. What does Hal think of him?" he asked curiously.

Minnie pursed her lips in thought. She was a pretty woman, rather than a beautiful one, but pregnancy agreed with her, lending a shine to mousy hair and a glow to her apple-dumpling cheeks.

"Hmm. He rather approves, though Melton being Melton, he is inclined to watch sharply, lest new brother pocket the teaspoons and put them up the spout to finance his habit of opium-eating and his three mistresses."

"I see that Hal has waited much too long to forbid you newspapers," Grey said, very pleased indeed to hear that Hal approved of Percy, in spite of the small awkwardness between them at first meeting. "But you must have had some visitors yourself of late; who has come to call?"

"My grandmother, two aunts, six cousins, a rather nice little woman collecting money for the relief of widows of brickmakers—she actually *did* pinch one of the teaspoons, but Nortman caught her and shook it out of her, quite fun, such an amazing quantity of things she had stuffed into her bodice." She dimpled at the butler, who inclined his head respectfully. "Oh, and Captain Bates's lady came this afternoon. She came to see Hal, of course, but he wasn't in, and I was bored, so invited her to stay to tea."

"Captain Bates's lady?" Grey repeated in surprise. "I had not heard that he was married."

"He isn't; she's his mistress," she said frankly, then laughed at his expression. "Don't tell me you are *shocked*, John?"

He was, but not entirely for the reasons she supposed.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"She told me-more or less."

"Meaning what?"

Minnie rolled her eyes at him in exaggerated patience.

"Meaning that she was so agitated that she could not contain the purpose of her desire to speak with Melton, and so told me of her concern for the captain—I hear he has been arrested, did you know?"

"I had heard something of the matter." Grey put aside his cup, waving away Nortman, hovering with the coffeepot. "But—"

"And I knew she must be his mistress and not his wife, because I'd met her before—with her husband." She took a demure sip of her freshly filled cup, eyes dancing at him.

"Who is ...?" he prompted.

"A Mr. Tomlinson. Very wealthy. Member of Parliament for some nasty little borough whose name I forget, in Kent. I met him just the once, at a subscription ball. He's fat, and hasn't two words to rub together; little wonder his wife's taken a lover."

"Little wonder," Grey murmured, thinking furiously. *Tomlinson, Tomlinson* ... The name rang no bells for him at all. Could he possibly have anything to do with the conspiracy Hal had told him of?

"What was her concern?" he asked. "And why did she come to Hal?"

"Well, the captain was arrested on Thursday," Minnie said reasonably. "She naturally wants him released. And evidently Hal is a good friend of the captain's—not that he'd ever mentioned it to *me*, of course."

Not that he mentioned it to me, either, Grey thought cynically. And

what is our supposedly shirt-lifting captain doing with a mistress? Hal had certainly not mentioned that aspect of the matter to Minnie, though, and a few more questions failed to elicit anything further in the way of information. Mrs. Tomlinson had been distraught, but hadn't known anything beyond the fact that Captain Bates had been arrested.

"She doesn't even know where he is, poor thing." Minnie's wide, fair brow crinkled in pity. "Do you think you could find out, John? I could send her a note, at least. Anonymously," she added. "I suppose Melton wouldn't like me to sign it."

"A very reasonable supposition. I'll see what I can find out tomorrow—oh. I forgot; I am leaving in the morning for the Lake District. But I will see what I can discover before I leave."

"The Lake District?" Minnie stared at him, then at the closed drapes, where the window glass rattled faintly in the wind behind its layers of lace and blue velvet. "In *this* weather? What is it, a form of family dementia? Next thing you know, your mother will announce her departure for Tierra del Fuego in the midst of a hurricane."

Grey smiled at her, realizing that it would be injudicious to mention Geneva Dunsany's death to an expectant mother.

"A prisoner of mine, from Ardsmuir, is paroled there. I must interview him, concerning a few administrative matters"—"administrative" was a word sure to extinguish interest in even the most curious; sure enough, Minnie's eyes showed a faint glaze—"and I must go now, to be sure of returning in time for the wedding, since the regiment will be departing for France soon thereafter."

"Mr. Fraser? Melton told me about him. Yes, you will have to hurry." She sighed, unconsciously pressing a hand over her abdomen. Hal had said the child was expected in the autumn; there was a good chance that it would be born before his return.

Grey did his best to distract Minnie from this distressing prospect with the story of his encounter with the O'Higginses in Hyde Park, and succeeded in getting her to laugh again.

When he left at last, she stood a-tiptoe at the door to kiss his cheek, then looked up at him with unaccustomed graveness.

"You will be careful, John? My daughter will need her godfather, you know."

"Daughter?" He glanced involuntarily at her still-flat midsection.

"She has to be. I really can't bear another man to worry about—going off to the ends of the earth to be cut to pieces or die of flux and

plague, wretched creatures that you are." She was still smiling, but he heard the tremor in her voice, and touched her shoulder gently.

"Godfather?" he said.

"Don't mention it to Melton; I haven't told him yet."

"Your secrets are safe with me," he assured her, and her smile grew more natural.

"Good. But you will be careful, John?"

"I will," he said, and stepped into the swirling whiteness, wondering as he did so whether it was James Fraser or himself who carried the air of doom that impelled both his mother and Minnie to urge him to carefulness.



He had it in mind to ask his mother just that, amongst other questions, but discovered upon his return to Jermyn Street that Minnie had perhaps been more astute than he thought in her discernment of a family mania for travel; the countess had indeed departed. Not for Tierra del Fuego, true; merely for a play in Drury Lane—the one which he had hoped to see with Percy Wainwright, ironically enough—after which she proposed to spend the night at General Stanley's house in town, because of the snow.

The effect upon his own intentions was the same, though, and he was obliged to content himself with writing a brief note to Hal, informing him of his own proposed absence, the date of his return, and a firm statement that he expected to be apprised of any further discoveries apropos the document of interest—meaning the journal page.

He considered mentioning the possibility that the countess had received a similar page, but dismissed it. Hal had said he would speak with their mother about the page; if she had received another, she would presumably tell him. And Grey had every intention of speaking with the countess himself upon his return from Helwater.

He was putting down his quill when he recollected the matter of the O'Higginses, and with a sigh, took it up again, this time to write a brief note to Captain Wilmot, under whose authority the O'Higginses theoretically fell—though in fact, he was privately inclined to consider them more a force of nature than properly disciplined parts of a military engine.

"It's stopped snowing, me lord!" Tom Byrd's voice came faintly to him, and he glanced aside, to see his valet's lower half protruding from the open window. A cold draft wound its way about his ankles like a ghostly cat, but the wind had died. Evidently the storm had passed.

He came to stand behind Tom, who pulled his head in, red-cheeked from the cold. Everything outside was still, pure and peaceful in a blanket of white. He scooped a bit of fresh snow from the windowsill with his finger and ate it, enjoying the granular feel of it on his tongue as it melted, and the faint taste of soot and metal that it seemed to carry. There was no more than an inch or two upon the sill, and the sky was now clear, a cold deep violet, full of stars.

"Sun in the morning, I'll be bound," Tom said with satisfaction. "The roads will be clear in no time!"

"The roads will be mud in no time, you mean," Grey said, but smiled nonetheless. Despite the grim nature of their errand, he shared Tom's lightening of the heart at thought of a journey. It had been a long winter indoors.

Finished with the packing, Tom had now picked up Grey's discarded greatcoat, coat, and waistcoat, and was turning out the pockets in his usual methodical fashion, putting loose coins into Grey's pocketbook, tossing crumpled handkerchiefs into a pile of dirty linen, setting aside loose buttons to be sewn on, and looking askance at various of the other items contained therein.

"It's a pritchel," Grey said helpfully, seeing Tom's brows go up over a small pointed metal implement. "Or part of one. Thing for punching nail holes in a horseshoe."

"'Course it is," Tom said, laying the object aside with a glance at Grey. "Does whoever you lifted it from want it back, you reckon?"

"I shouldn't think so; it's broken." A pritchel was normally about a foot long; the bit on his desk was only two or three inches, broken from the pointed end.

Grey frowned, trying to think where on earth he had acquired the fragment. It was true; he had a habit of stuffing things unconsciously into his pockets, as well as a habit of picking up small objects and turning them over in his fingers while talking to people. The result being that he not infrequently came home with the proceeds of inadvertent petty theft in his pockets, and was obliged to return the items via Tom.

Tom examined a small pebblelike object critically, sniffed it, and

determining it to be a lump of sugar from the Balboa, thriftily ate it before picking another object out of a handful of squashed papers.

"Well, now, this 'un's Lord Melton's," he said, holding up a Masonic ring. "Seen it on him. You been with him today?"

"No, yesterday." Memory thus jogged, he came to look over Tom's shoulder. "You're right, it is Melton's. I'll send it round to his house by one of the footmen. Oh—and I'll keep that. You can burn the rest." He caught sight of the folded broadsheet he had taken from the coffeehouse, and retrieved it from the pile of paper scraps.

A faint smell of coffee wafted from the page as he unfolded it, and he experienced a vivid recollection of Percy Wainwright's face, flushed from the heat of the coffee he was drinking. Dismissing the faint sense of warmth this brought him, he turned his attention to the article concerning Ffoulkes.

The gist of it was much what Hal had told him. Prominent barrister Melchior Ffoulkes, discovered dead in his study by his wife, thought to have perished by his own hand ... assorted remarks by persons who had known deceased, general shock and consternation ... coroner's inquest to be held ... but only vague allusions to what might have caused the man's suicide, and no hint whatever of treason or sodomitical conspiracies, and no mention of Captain Michael Bates, let alone the other fellow Hal had mentioned—Otway? *So far*, Grey thought cynically, crumpling the newspaper into a ball and tossing it into the fire.

The thought, though, recalled to him what Minnie had said about the visit of Captain Bates's mistress. It wasn't impossible, he supposed; there were men who enjoyed the favors of both men and women—but it wasn't common, and such persons as he knew of that bent generally displayed a sexual indiscriminacy that seemed at odds with the notion of such a settled relationship as the word "mistress" implied.

Well ... what of it, if Bates were in fact not inclined to men? As he had said to Hal, sodomitical conspiracies were the common resort of any newspaper in need of news. People did love to read about depravity, and if the usual daily reports of arrests, trials, and pillorying for that vice began to pall ...

"Will you need aught else, me lord?" Tom's voice broke his train of thought, and he looked up to see his valet hovering, arms filled with dirty linen and heavy-eyed, obviously longing for his bed.

"Oh. No, Tom, I thank you. Oh! Perhaps one thing ..." He picked up the volume of his father's journal from his desk. "Will you put this on its shelf in the library as you go?"

"Certainly, me lord. Good night, me lord." Tom dexterously shifted his load in order to free a hand for the book and went out. Grey closed the door behind him and stretched, suddenly overcome by a desire for his own bed. He bent to extinguish the candle, then stopped short.

Damn, he'd forgotten that he'd promised Minnie to try to discover Captain Bates's whereabouts. Stifling a groan, he uncapped his inkwell and sat down again. Harry Quarry, he thought, would be best placed to discover Bates's circumstances; Harry knew everyone, and liked Minnie. And Harry was a sufficiently intimate friend that he could write bluntly of the matter, without niceties or circumspections.

Send me word of your discoveries as well, if you will, he wrote, and added the direction for Helwater.

As he pressed the half-moon signet he wore on his right hand into the sealing wax, he noticed that Hal's Masonic ring and the broken pritchel still lay on his desk. He picked up the ring and rolled it idly between his palms, trying to think if there were any further missives that might come between himself and bed.

A momentary urge to write to Percy Wainwright flickered in his brain—only a line, to express regret for his absence, a renewed desire to meet upon his return—but the church bells were tolling the hour of midnight, and his mind had grown so fatigued that he doubted his ability to put down even such a brief sentiment coherently.

His hands relaxed, and the Masonic ring rolled into his left palm, clinking against his own ring. Hector's sapphire.

Hal shared Grey's nervous habit of fiddling with things as he talked, but was most given to taking his rings on and off—this wasn't the first time he'd lost one. Grey, in contrast, never removed his rings, save to wash.

He turned his closed hand, so the sapphire glinted in the candlelight, a soft, true blue. The color of Hector's eyes.

Do you mind? he thought suddenly. About Percy? It was impulse; he expected no reply, and received none.

Now and then he wished ardently that he had faith in a merciful God and an afterlife in which the dead might live on—Jamie Fraser had such faith; burned with it, in a way that excited both Grey's curiosity and his envy. But Grey was a rationalist. He accepted the existence of God, but had no conviction of the nature of such a being, and no sense that his creator took a personal interest in him. Just as

well, considering.

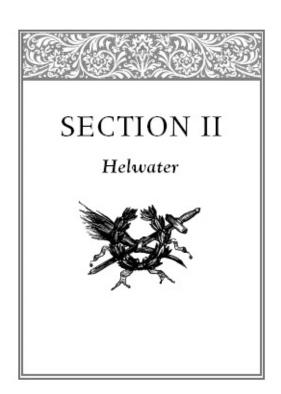
He flicked Hal's ring idly onto his own middle finger—where it slid down, hanging loosely round his knuckle.

He frowned at it for a moment, feeling something obscurely wrong, but not realizing what. Then his hand curled tight in reflex.

His brother's hands were the same size as his own; they routinely took each other's gloves in mistake. Hal wore his ring on his own middle finger. Ergo, it wasn't Hal's ring.

He took it off and turned it over, squinting in the candlelight, but there was no inscription within, no mark of ownership. He was not a Freemason himself, but had many friends who were; this was a common style of ring.

"Well, where the devil did I pick you up, then?" he said to it, aloud.



Chapter 6



Breakage

Every time, he thought it would be different. Removed, caught up in the boredom and intermittent terror of a soldier's life, apart from simple daily things, the normal intercourse of humanity—it was understandable that in these circumstances, he would think of Jamie Fraser as something remarkable; use the image of the man as a talisman, a touchstone for his own emotions.

But surely the effect should lessen, should disappear entirely, when he actually saw the man? Fraser was a Scot, a Jacobite, a paroled prisoner, a groom—no one that he would normally take notice of, let alone regard especially.

And yet, every time, it was the same, the bloody same. How? Why? He would ride up the winding drive at Helwater, and his pulse would already be beating in his ears. He would greet Dunsany and his family, talking cordially of this and that, accepting refreshment, admiring the women's gowns, Lady Dunsany's latest painting. All in an increasing agony of impatience, wanting—needing—to go out to the stables, to look, to see.

And then to spot him at a distance—exercising a horse, working at the pasture fences—or to come upon him unexpectedly face to face, emerging from the tack room or coming down the ladder from the loft where he slept. Each time, Grey's heart leapt in his chest.

The lines of neck and spine, the solid curve of buttock and columned thigh, the sun-darkened flesh of his throat, sun-bleached hair of his arms—even the small imperfections, the scars that marred one hand, the pockmark at the corner of his mouth—and the slanted eyes, dark with hostility and wariness. It was perhaps no surprise that he should feel physical arousal; the man was beautiful, and dangerous in his beauty.

And yet his excitement quieted at once when he was actually in Fraser's presence. A calm descended upon him, a strange content.

Once he had looked into those eyes, been acknowledged by them—then he could return to the house, go about his business, make conversation with other people. It was as though he was anxious, lest the world have changed in his absence, then reassured that it had not;

Jamie Fraser still stood at its center.

Would it be that way again? It shouldn't be. After all, there was Percy Wainwright now, to divert his attention, engage his interest. And yet ... he nodded to Tom, and turned his horse's head into the winding road that led upward to Helwater, feeling an aching in his chest, as though the cold air pressed upon it.

It shouldn't be, he repeated silently to himself. And yet ...



Lord Dunsany had been diminished by his daughter's death. The death of his son during the Rising had aged him suddenly, runnels appearing in the flesh of his face like dry valleys carved by unshed tears. Yet the old nobleman had stood like a rock then, strength for his wife and daughters.

Now ... Dunsany stood to greet Grey, who was so much alarmed by his appearance that he dropped his hat on the floor of the library and hurried to embrace his friend, moved as much by fear that Dunsany would crumple and fall as by shared grief.

The old man's wig brushed his cheek, rough and unpowdered; surely Dunsany had been taller, before. The earl's arms were still firm; they clutched Grey with desperate strength, and he felt a deep subterranean quiver run through the desiccated body pressed to his.

"John," Dunsany whispered, shocking him, for the viscount had never used his Christian name before. "God forgive me, John. It is all my fault."

"Nonsense, nonsense," he murmured. He had no notion what Dunsany might mean, but gently patted the old man's back, breathing in the dusty scent of his coat, the slight sourness of unwashed skin. He glanced up discreetly; the butler who had opened the door to him stood a few feet away, Grey's hat crushed in his hands and distress at his employer's condition plain on his face.

"A little brandy, perhaps?"

The butler vanished with alacrity, in spite of Dunsany's feeble protest that it was barely noon.

"Noon of a bloody cold, wet, filthy day," Grey said firmly, escorting Dunsany back to the chair from which he had risen. He cleared his throat, for the tears he had not shed for Geneva had risen at sight of her father's pitiable state. He blinked several times, and bent to pick up the poker.

"Do you call this a fire?"

"I do, yes." Dunsany was making a gallant effort to recover himself, and managed a wavering smile. "What do you call it?"

"Completely inadequate." It was a small fire, almost niggardly, though there was a quantity of dry wood, and a basket of peat, as well. Moved by impulse, he stirred the fire recklessly, then tossed two of the peats onto the wakened blaze. The smell of it rose at once in the room, musky, dark, and ancient. It was the smell of Scotland, and a shiver that had nothing to do with the chill of the day ran through Grey's body.

"That's better." He pulled another chair up to the hearth and sat down, rubbing his hands with affected briskness, meanwhile wondering what on earth to say.

Dunsany saved him the trouble.

"It is so good of you to come, John." He made another attempt at a smile, this one better. Almost despite himself, he stretched out frail hands to the fire. "Was it a very dreadful journey? This incessant rain..."

"Not at all," Grey said, though in fact the roads had been liquid mud—where they still existed—and what would normally have been a four-day journey had taken nearly a week. He was in stocking feet at the moment, having left his encrusted jackboots in the hall with his drenched and filthy cloak, but Dunsany appeared not to notice. "Your wife—she is ...?"

The faint traces of life that had warmed Dunsany's cheeks vanished at once, like a snuffed candle.

"Ah. Yes. She is ... a rock," Dunsany said softly, eyes on the fire, which had begun to smolder with the low blue flame characteristic of peat. "A rock," he repeated, more firmly. "Her fortitude has sustained us all."

Oh, has it? Grey thought. Something was wrong here. Lady Dunsany had never failed to greet him within moments of his arrival, but she was nowhere in sight. Neither had he ever known her to be far from her husband's side—yet as they spoke, he became aware that the desolate feel of the room was not due entirely to the meager fire. It was clean and orderly, but its usual warm appeal—due largely to the bits of clutter and careless ornament that Lady Dunsany strewed in her wake—had quite gone.

"I look forward to paying my respects to Lady Dunsany," Grey said, cautious.

"Oh, she will be so pleased to—oh!" Realization struck the elderly nobleman, and he began to struggle out of his chair. "I am so stupid today, Lord John, do forgive me. I have quite forgot to send Hanks to tell her you are here!"

Dunsany had barely regained his feet, though, when Grey heard voices in the corridor and stood, as well. Hanks had evidently taken matters into his own hands; the butler opened the door, bowing Lady Dunsany and her daughter Isobel into the room, following them with the tray of brandy.

"Lord John! Lord John!"

The advent of the women had much the same effect as his stirring up the fire; the room seemed at once warmer, the cold staleness of Dunsany's lonely lair dissipated in a wave of feeling and high-pitched voices.

They were in mourning, of course, and yet they brought with them a sense of movement and animation, like a very small flock of starlings.

Isobel was weeping, but as much in gratitude for his presence, he thought, as with grief. She flung herself upon his bosom, and he folded her gently in his arms, grateful himself for the opportunity to provide even this simple service. He feared he had much less to offer either of her parents.

Lady Dunsany was patting his arm, smiling in welcome, though her face was pale and set. Still, he caught sight of the grief lurking in her eyes, and moved by impulse, reached out an arm and drew her into his embrace, as well.

"My dears," he murmured to the women. "I am so sorry."

He was terribly conscious, as they must be, of the sadly diminished state of the little family. Memories of other meetings swept him, when both Gordon and Geneva were with them, their friends filled the house, and his own coming was an occasion filled with delight and unceasing talk and laughter.

Hanks had taken it upon himself to pour the brandy, and had placed a glass in Lord Dunsany's hand with gentle insistence. The old man stood blinking at it, as though he had never seen such a thing before. He did not look at his wife or daughter.

Grey became aware, in the midst of this tumult, that Lord Dunsany's description of his wife had been neither admiring nor metaphorical; he had been stating a physical fact. Lady Dunsany was a rock. She accepted his embrace, but did not yield to it. "But you have a grandson, I understand, Lady Dunsany?" he said, drawing back a bit in order to look down at her. "I hope the child is well."

"Oh, yes." Her lips trembled a bit, but she smiled, nonetheless. "Yes, he is a lusty dear boy. Such a—such a comfort."

He noticed the brief hesitation. She was dry-eyed, and did not glance at her husband—though Lord John could not recall any occasion on which Lord Dunsany's welfare had not been her chief concern. Yes, something was quite wrong here, beyond the tragedy of Geneva's death.

It is all my fault, Lord Dunsany had blurted.

He began to understand his own role here. He was neutral ground, no-man's-land. Or everyone's.



Isobel did not appear at tea, later.

"She is shattered, poor thing," Lady Dunsany said, her own lips trembling. "She was so much attached to her sister, and the circumstances—there was hellish weather, and we arrived almost too late. She was terribly affected. But she will be heartened by your company; so good of you to come." She did her best to smile at him, but it was a ghastly attempt.

"I'm sure that once the funeral is over ..." She trailed off and her face seemed to collapse upon itself, as though the thought of the funeral oppressed her physically.

He began to have an odd feeling, as the evening drew in. The Dunsanys had always been a close and affectionate family, and he was not surprised that they should be deeply affected by Geneva's death. He had known them in such affliction before, when Gordon died. But on that occasion, their grief had been shared, the members of the family drawing together, supporting each other in their mourning.

Not now. He sat between his host and hostess at the tea table, and might as well have sat on the equator, between two frozen poles of ice and snow. Both spoke pleasantly and with great courtesy—to him. Watching carefully, he thought that the constraint between them was composed of a sense of blame on her part, clearly guilt on his—but why?

He had been cold, he thought, since the moment of his arrival. There was a good fire, of course, hot tea, coffee, toasted bread—but the chill of the day, the house, and the company mortified his bones.

"Oh!" Lady Dunsany started, rather as though she had sat upon a drawing pin. "I had forgot, Lord John. There is a letter for you, come this morning."

"A letter?" Grey was startled. No one save his family knew he had come to Helwater. What urgency might have compelled them to send a letter upon his heels? The messenger must have passed him on the road.

Thoughts of Hal, the journal page, the conspiracy, flitted through his mind. But what could have happened that would not abide his return? He took the folded paper from Lady Dunsany, expecting to see either Hal's jaggedly impatient lettering, or his mother's untidy scrawl—no one in the family wrote with any grace at all—but the direction was in an unfamiliar hand, round and clear.

The seal was plain; he broke it, frowning—and then felt an extraordinary warmth flow through him, reaching even his chilled toes.

There was no salutation. The note was brief:

I had wished to send you a sonnet, but I am no poet, and would not borrow someone else's words—not even the verses of your friend the Sub-Genius, filled with meaning as they are.

I wish you well in your errand of compassion. I hope it may be quickly fulfilled, and your journey home accomplished even more quickly.

I cannot stop thinking of you.

He stared at this in astonishment, broken only when Lord Dunsany bent, grunting slightly, to pick up something from the carpet near his feet.

"What is this?" He held it up, a faint smile momentarily easing the rigidity of his grief. That was a rhetorical question, as it was perfectly obvious that the object he held was a short, curling lock of dark hair, bound with red thread.

"It fell when you opened your letter," he explained, handing it to Grey with the shadow of a you-sly-dog look. "I didn't know you had a sweetheart, Lord John."

"A sweetheart?" Lady Dunsany's look of interest deepened, and she

leaned to peer closely at the lock of hair in his hand. "A dark lady, I see. It is not that Miss Pendragon of whom your mother wrote, is it?"

"I think it very unlikely," Grey assured her, suppressing a brief shudder at thought of Elizabeth Pendragon, a Welsh heiress with a very loud voice and immense feet. "However, I am afraid I am in complete ignorance myself—the missive is unsigned."

He flashed the paper quickly before her eyes, not allowing time for her to read it, before tucking it safely into his waistcoat.

"You're blushing, Lord John!" Lady Dunsany sounded faintly amused.

He was, curse it.



He refused the footman's offer to see him to his room after tea; he knew the house well. His path took him past the nursery, though, and he was surprised to see the door standing open, a strong draft blowing out of it that stirred the drapes on the window on the other side of the hallway.

Peering in, he at first thought the room empty. The door to an inner room, doubtless where the child and his nurse slept, was shut; the outer room still showed its history as schoolroom to the Dunsany children. A long, scarred table stood against one wall, shelves full of ragged, much-loved books against another, and faded maps of the world, England, and her colonies fluttered dimly in the light of a guttering rush dip perched beside the door. The window on the far side of the room was open, pale curtains billowing, and he hurried to close it.

A gust of wind carried the curtains sideways for an instant, though, and he saw the slight figure standing in the window, her hair and skirts aswirl in the wind.

"Isobel!" He was seized by a momentary panic, suddenly gripped by the notion that she meant to throw herself out, and he lunged forward, grasping her arm so hard that she shrieked.

"Isobel," he said, more gently. "Come away. You'll catch your death."

"I want to," she said in a muffled voice, refusing to look at him, though she let him pull her into the room. Her clothes were damp with rain, her hair hanging wild about her face, and her flesh was very cold. Grey glanced at the hearth, but the fire had not been lit. Without comment, he took off his coat and wrapped it round her shoulders.

"I am so sorry, my dear," he said quietly, and reached to close the window. The wind died and the curtains fell limp, half soaked. She stood unmoving, a small, draggled thing, like a mouse rescued from a cat—perhaps too late. He touched her shoulder.

"Let me take you downstairs," he said. "You should have something hot, some dry clothes ..." She should have her mother, he thought. But of course—she had chosen to hide her grief here, in order not to distress her parents.

She raised her head suddenly, her face a grimace of bewildered grief.

"My sister is dead," she said in a small, choked voice. "How shall I live?"

He put his arms round her and held her close, making the sorts of soothing noises one made to injured dogs or frightened horses. She was making much the same sort of sound as an animal in distress, for that matter; small whimpers of pain, with now and then a great, tearing shudder of breath. Had she been a horse, he would have seen the pain ripple through her flanks. He felt it, coming in waves that beat against his body.

She did not resemble Geneva at all, being small and gently rounded, blond like their mother; Geneva had taken after Lord Dunsany, tall and lean, with thick chestnut hair. Isobel's head fit neatly just below his chin.

"It will be better," he whispered to her. "Bearable. The pain doesn't go away—but it grows more bearable. It does."

She jerked back out of his grasp, face contorted.

"But what am I to do *now*? How shall I live until it does?" She choked, wiped her streaming nose on her sleeve, and turned a wildeyed look on him. "How can I? What can I *do*?"

He hesitated, wanting urgently to tell her something useful, knowing there was nothing.

"I ... er ... used to smash things," he offered tentatively. "When my father died. It helped. A bit."

She blinked, shuddering and trembling, and let out a small, hysterical giggle, instantly quelled with a hand across her mouth. Slowly she drew it away.

"Oh, I do so want to smash something," she whispered. "Please,

please." Wide blue eyes spiked with tear-clotted lashes implored him to find something suitable.

Flustered, he looked round the schoolroom for something breakable and cheap. Not the ewer or basin, the candlestick was pewter ... For lack of a better notion, he took down the rush dip from above the door, and lit the chamber stick from it. He would have blown out the wick, but she seized the little pottery vessel from him before he could, and, opening the window, hurled it with all her strength into the dark.

Leaning out beside her, he saw it smash on the wet slates below in a satisfying explosion of fragments. A slick of spilled oil burned briefly, a small tongue of blue flame that wavered for a moment in the windy rain, and went out.

The stronger light of the new candle in the chamber stick showed him her face. Her fair skin was blotched, her eyes were closed, her mouth a little open in slack relief. She tottered, knees giving way, and he hastily grabbed her arm, pulling her back from the window.

"Thank you," she said, and took a long, shuddering breath. "That ... is better. A bit. I can't go on breaking things, though, can I?" Groping for inspiration, he found one.

"Your father has a couple of good fowling pieces. Tom Byrd and I will go out with you tomorrow, and I'll teach you to shoot clay pigeons. They break very nicely."

She wiped a hand beneath her nose, like a small child. He fished a handkerchief out of his sleeve and handed it to her.

"Not tomorrow," she said, and blew her nose. "There's the f-funeral tomorrow." She closed her eyes for a moment, and seemed to sway. "I think—I think that if only I can live through *that*, perhaps it will be ..." She stopped speaking, as though she had simply found it too great an effort to continue.

"It will be better," he said firmly. It had to be, he thought. None of them will survive, otherwise.



Isobel eventually suffered him to lead her to her chamber, where a frightened-looking maid drew her in, and he continued on to his own room, wishing that his sense of duty would allow him to send down word that he was indisposed, and take supper in his chamber.

His sense of foreboding was not eased by Tom Byrd, who was as usual a fount of disturbing information, gleaned from the servants over their own tea.

"Not surprised to hear *that*," he said, of Grey's brief account of Isobel's response to her sister's death. "Lady Ellesmere was almost dead when they got there, and Miss Elspeth said the bed was soaked right through with blood, and the carpet all round, too. Squished up into your shoes when you stepped on it, she said."

Grey repressed a brief shudder at the thought.

"The hangings, too, all splashed about, like a butcher's shop," Tom continued, evidently determined to give a full report. "She said—"

"Who is Miss Elspeth?" Grey interrupted, not wanting to hear any more grisly details. "Was she there?"

"Yes, me lord. She's Lady Ellesmere's and Miss Isobel's old nurse. She went with Lady Ellesmere at her marriage, but when she died, she came back here to help care for the little 'un. Nice old stick."

Tom hovered in front of the armoire, assessing the possibilities.

"You're to be pallbearer for the countess, me lord?"

"Yes. The dark gray do, do you think? Black velvet seems rather dramatic."

"Oh, no, me lord." Tom shook his head decidedly. "You wouldn't, in London, but this is the country. They'll expect black, and the more dramatic, the better."

Grey smiled briefly.

"I suppose you're right. You've become very skilled at valeting, Tom."

Tom nodded matter-of-factly at the compliment.

"Yes, I have, me lord. Not but what you could wear red silk and a diamond in your nose like the Earl of Sandwich. They'll be talking of this funeral for months."

Grey caught the slight emphasis on "this," and looked sharply at Tom.

"Because of the tragic nature of the countess's death, do you mean?"

"Aye, that—but more because of the earl. Did you know, me lord, the talk is that he ... er ... laid hands upon himself?" Tom spoke delicately, avoiding looking at Grey—which told Grey just how accurately the servants' gossip at Jermyn Street had informed his valet regarding the Greys' own family scandal. How long had Tom known about it? he wondered.

"I hadn't, no." So that was what was behind at least some of the Dunsanys' agitation. "Does everyone know? The public at large, I mean, not just the servants here?"

"Oh, yes, sir! Jack the footman says the betting is five to three down the Bells, as how vicar will cut up rough tomorrow when they bring him in. Not let him be buried in hallowed ground, aye?"

"The vicar ... what, is the earl being buried tomorrow, too?" He was momentarily staggered. He couldn't think how he had overlooked the earl's death—or rather, he could. No one had spoken of the late earl, or his untimely and coincidental demise. All the talk was of Geneva; none of the Dunsany household had mentioned the earl or his funeral at all, and he had unconsciously assumed that it had already taken place.

"Yes, me lord." Tom looked pleased at being the bearer of interesting news. "The old earl hadn't any kin, and Lord Dunsany was all for burying him on the quiet, like; tuck him safe away under the chapel floor up at Ellesmere. But Lady Dunsany wouldn't have it. *She* said," he lowered his voice portentously, "as how it would look fishy, see?"

"I am completely sure Lady Dunsany said nothing of the sort, but I take your meaning, Tom. And so?"

"And so she got her way. Ladies usually do, you know," Tom informed him. "You want to be careful of that Lady Joffrey, me lord. She's got her eye—"

"Yes, I know. So it was Lady Dunsany's idea to bury the earl together with his wife?" Brazen it out with a lavish public funeral, and dare anyone to claim the earl's death was not an accident. It was not a bad idea, he'd grant her that. It would give rise to more talk in the short run, of course—but if the vicar could be coerced into burying the earl in consecrated ground, it would put paid to the rumors of suicide, and the talk would die a natural death, with no lingering whiff of scandal to follow her grandson.

The coroner's jury had brought back a verdict of accident, he knew. Such a jury was bound to be sympathetic to the Dunsanys, who were popular in the district. But if the vicar chose to make a scene ... No wonder the Dunsanys were on edge.

"Yes, me lord. They was back and forth about it, and it wasn't decided for sure until this morning, Mr. Hanks says. But the vicar will have heard. They'd have to send him word, if they meant him to do the funeral."

Yes, and doubtless the vicar would be grappling with his own conscience through the night, if he had doubts about the matter.

Tom was hesitating, evidently wanting to ask something, but unsure how it might be received. Grey raised a brow, inviting Tom to speak.

"They said—is it true, me lord, as how if a nobleman does himself in, the Crown can take the estate?"

Grey felt a tightening of the belly, but answered calmly. That, of course, was why the jury had brought it in as accident.

"Yes. On the grounds that self-murder is a crime against God, and against the state, as well. But it is not an invariable consequence. The king may choose not to exercise confiscation, or the ... suicide may be ruled to have taken place while the person's mind was deranged, thus relieving him of the onus of crime." He took a deep breath and turned round, looking directly at his valet. "That's what was said of my father. That he was insane."

Tom stared at him, expressionless, but with such a depth of sympathy in his eyes that Grey was obliged to turn away again, pretending to rummage for something in one of the saddlebags that had been brought up.

"I'm that sorry, me lord," Tom said at last, so softly that Grey had the option of pretending not to have heard him. He thrust a hand into the saddlebag, feeling about at random, and closed his fist on something hard. It didn't matter what. He closed his eyes and squeezed it as hard as he could, until the bones of his knuckles popped.

"Thank you," he said, just as softly.

When he opened his eyes again, he was alone.

Chapter 7



Penance

He could not sleep. It had been late when he left Dunsany, the old gentleman having reached a state of near insensibility over a decanter of claret after supper. Grey had given Dunsany over to the care of the viscount's own valet, who got the old man to his feet and led him gently off to bed, shuffling and murmuring. Grey then sought his own bed, with the feeling that this day had lasted several years and was long overdue to be expunged by sleep.

Sleep, however, perversely declined to come knit up the raveled sleeve of care. Instead, the bad fairy of insomnia chose to take up residence on the foot of his bed, cozily recalling everything from Tom's gory description of Geneva's death to her father's drunken self-reproaches, in which he blamed himself repeatedly for everything from arranging the marriage to allowing Geneva too much freedom.

His room was the same they always gave him. The Blue Room, it was called, for the patterned silk paper on the walls, repeated scenes of Dutch life, Delft blue on a cream background. Masculine in aspect, its furnishings luxurious, its hearth generous, it was one of the most comfortable rooms in the house. And yet he felt chilled and restless, at odds with his surroundings.

He was tired to the point of exhaustion, but found himself unable to relax into the comforts of the feather bed, despite the wine and the lateness of the hour. Tom had left a jug of hot milk on the table, wrapped in a towel. He smiled a little at that, touched by Tom's thoughtfulness—though he hadn't drunk warm milk in twenty years and didn't feel sufficiently desperate as to start now.

He lay down on the bed again, hoping that recumbency might lead to a gradual relaxation, but didn't put out the candle. For some time, he watched the glow from the fire animate the scenes on the wallpaper, his hand flat on the empty space beside him. How many times had he seen those calm blue scenes? He had been a regular visitor at Helwater since the early days of his commission, when the Dunsanys' son, Gordon, had invited him to stay. Gordon had been killed in the Jacobite Rising, and the Dunsanys, in their grief, had adopted Grey as a sort of foster son. Now they had lost a daughter, as

well.

How old had Geneva been, the first time he had come? Four? Five?

"Do you see that one?" he whispered, as though to an invisible companion. "The one with the sailing boat? That's my favorite. I can imagine sailing down the Dutch canals, seeing all the windmills turn."

What's a windmill, sir? The whispered words were only in his mind, but his arm bent, curling in memory around a little girl who'd crept into his room in the middle of the night, frightened by a nightmare.

"A great tall mill, something like the mill by the river. Grindstones, you know. But it has no wheel for the water to turn. Instead, there are large sails, four of them, like arms, on the top of the mill. The wind makes them go round, and thus the corn is ground. There's one on the wall—do you see it?"

But he heard no answer; only the quiet pop and hiss of damp in the burning peat. His arm relaxed, and he smoothed the coverlet gently with his hand, as though it were a small girl's disheveled, silky hair, to be tucked back within her nightcap.

He stayed thus for some time, thoughts drifting, staring at the flickering blue shapes on the wall. Became aware that he was still stroking the coverlet, slowly, but that the image in his mind was no longer that of a child's hair. Soft, but coarser. Springy curls. Dark. And an imagined sense of warmth from the skin beneath.

"Jesus," he said, and curled his hand into a fist. Rising, he crossed the room and jerked open the armoire. He groped, searching in the dimness for the pocket of his coat, felt no crackling of paper and gripped the cloth in sudden alarm, before catching sight of the letter, neatly set beside his hairbrushes on the shelf where Tom had placed it.

He took it up, heart beating faster, and tilted the paper. The lock of hair fell out into his hand. Dark, a single curl, tied with red thread.

I cannot stop thinking of you.

He unfolded the letter and read the line again, for the pleasure of seeing the words upon the page. Gazed at them for several moments, then carefully folded the paper again, and set it back in place.

In all truth, the words caused him as much disturbance as pleasure. He had not expected thoughts of Percy to follow him to Helwater, and was not sure of his feelings. He hoped, to be sure, that they might discover something between them. But what that something might be, or come to be, he had no notion. If it happened at all, though, he envisioned it happening in London. London was a separate world,

almost as though he were a different person there.

He did, on the other hand, know very well what his feelings were for Jamie Fraser. And being at Helwater, no more than a hundred yards from Fraser's physical presence, was sufficiently disturbing in itself. He had the irrational feeling that to take such pleasure in Percy's note was in some way a betrayal—but of what, for God's sake?

Moved by impulse, he drew back the heavy blue-velvet drapes at the window. It was a cloudy night, a thick rain still falling, but the sky held a faint sullen glow, the diffuse light of a hidden moon. He could see the dim outline of the stable roof through the streaks of rain on the windowpane.

"Hell," he said softly, left the window abruptly, and wandered round the room, picking up objects at random and putting them down again. He tried to return to his earlier thoughts—or to abandon all thought, purging the mind for sleep—but his efforts were bootless. James Fraser remained stubbornly in the center of his mind's eye. Grey had seen him once since his arrival—he had taken Grey's horse to the stables—but had had no opportunity to speak to him.

For God's sake, John, be careful.

His mother's words rang abruptly in his ear, and he shook his head, as though to dislodge an annoying mosquito.

And what, for God's sake, had his mother meant by *that*? Plainly, she meant Fraser; it was mention of the man and his Jacobite connexions that had frightened—yes, frightened—her. Why? What on earth did she think he might ask of Fraser? Or learn from him?

Something regarding his father's death. *Those* words came cold, from the dark recesses of his own mind. He shoved them reflexively away. His father had been dead for nearly seventeen years. He thought now and then of his father, but never of his death. And didn't mean to think of it now.

Such mortal thoughts, though, reminded him suddenly again of Geneva. Where was she tonight? Not in a spiritual sense—he trusted vaguely that she must be in heaven, though he had no concrete notion of the place—but in the physical?

The funeral would be tomorrow. Her body ... He glanced uneasily at the black night outside his window, as though she might be floating there, pale face staring in at him, her chestnut hair pasted to her skull by the pouring rain.

He pulled the curtains firmly shut. She would be in her coffin, ready for the procession to the church in the morning. Was she somewhere in the house? Surely she did not lie in some hogg house or desolate shed on the grounds?

The chapel. Of course. The thought came to him at once. He had never been in the chapel at Helwater; it dated from a much earlier century, when the Viscounts of the Wastwater had been Catholic, and it had been disused for years. He knew where it was, though; Geneva herself had shown him, waving a careless hand toward the small stone chamber that clung barnaclelike to the west side of the house.

"That's the old chapel," she had said. "We have a ghost there, did you know?"

"Well, I should hope so," he had replied, jesting. "All respectable families have at least one, do they not?"

She had looked at him queerly for a moment, but then laughed.

"Ours is a monk, a young man who kneels in prayer in the chapel at night. What kind of ghost has your family, then, Lord John?"

"Oh, we are not sufficiently respectable as to have an actual ghost of our own," he assured her gravely. "Nothing but the odd skeleton in the closet."

That had made her laugh immoderately—little did she know how true his remarks had been, he reflected, with a slight smile at the memory. The smile faded at the realization that he would not hear her laugh again.

He felt her absence suddenly and keenly. He had been so occupied with the grief of her family that he had felt her loss only as theirs, terrible, but experienced at a safe remove; now, in the deep solitude of the night, he understood it as his own. He stood for a moment, bereavement a sudden, small tear in his soul.

Unable to bear this for long, he reached with sudden decision for the armoire and found his cloak, threw it round his shoulders, pushed his feet into felt slippers, and went out into the corridor, easing the door softly to behind him. He would say farewell to her, at least, in private.

Discovering from within a room he had only seen from without was something of a challenge; Helwater, like most old houses, had been built in fits and starts as the finances and whimsy of successive viscounts allowed. Thus, it was a huge place—Lady Dunsany had told him that the entire east wing was closed in winter—and no passage went straightforwardly anywhere.

He had a good sense of direction, though, and knew that the chapel was at the northwest corner of the house. He worked his way through the twisting corridors as he would a maze, keeping a running count in his head of the turns, in order that he might find his way back again, and found that the exercise allowed him to keep his emotions at bay, if only for the moment.

The rain had kept up steadily all day, in that dismal winter downpour that darkens the spirit as it weights the land. The wind had come up now, and rain beat upon the shuttered windows in fitful bursts, marking his passage along the darkened corridors. He had brought a taper from his room, a faint glow to light his path. Something moved in the shadows and he stopped short.

Green eyes glowed for an instant and disappeared as the cat—it was only a cat—twined past his feet and vanished, silent as smoke. Was that Geneva's cat? She had had a kitten once, he knew. Would she not have taken it to Ellesmere? Perhaps her mother had brought it back. Perhaps ... perhaps he was trying to occupy his mind with pointless trifles in order to avoid thinking of Geneva dead, even as he made his way toward her bier.

Heart still beating like a drum, he wondered what he thought he was doing, but he had come thus far; to turn back now would seem an abandonment of her. He closed his eyes for an instant, reestablishing the map of the house he was building in his head, then opened them and set off again with purpose.

Several more turnings brought him abruptly to what seemed an outer wall of the house, its lichened blocks pierced by an arched lintel of honey-colored stone.

This was clearly the chapel's entrance; the figures of saints and angels were carved into the arch. They had escaped the mutilations of Cromwell's vandals in the last century—he made out the figure of what must be Michael the archangel in the center of the arch, flaming sword held aloft. Below him, Adam and Eve cowered behind crude fig leaves, Eve's hands crossed modestly over her generous breasts. Not saints, after all. On the other side of the arch, a serpent hung in looping coils from the branches of an apple tree, looking smugly amused.

Blessed Michael defend us. The words came to him suddenly, though he was neither Catholic nor even religious. It was a common saying among the Scottish prisoners at Ardsmuir, though. He had heard it in the Gaelic, many times, and finally had asked Jamie Fraser for the English meaning, one night when they had dined together.

Plainly he had found the right place. A small oil lamp burned in the

passage, throwing the archangel's visage into stern relief, and the flicker of candlelight was visible through the crack between the wooden doors under the archway. Wondering anew just what he was doing here, he hesitated for a moment, then shrugged and murmured "Blessed Michael defend us." He passed beneath the arch.

The chapel was tiny, and dark save the tall white candles that burned at head and foot of the closed coffin. It was draped in white silk, and glimmered like water.

He took a step toward it. Something large stirred in the darkness at his feet.

"Jesus!"

He dropped the taper, clapping a hand to his belt—where, alas, he had not placed his dagger.

A dark figure rose immense, very slowly, from the flags at his feet.

Every hair on his body stood erect and his heart thundered in his ears, as recognition tried vainly to overcome shock. The taper had gone out, and the man was visible only as a dark silhouette, haloed with the fire of the candles behind him.

He swallowed hard, trying to force his heart from his throat, and groped for words that were not altogether blasphemous.

"Bloody ... Christ," he managed, after several incoherent tries. "What in the name of God Himself are *you* doing here?"

"Praying," said a soft Scots voice, its softness no disguise for the shock in it—and an even more patent anger. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Praying?" Grey echoed, disbelief in his voice. "Lying on the floor?" He couldn't see Fraser's face, but heard the hiss of air through his teeth. They stood close enough to each other that he felt the cold emanating from Fraser's body, as though the other had been carved from ice. Christ, how long had the man been pressed to the freezing flags? And why? His eyes adjusting, he saw that the Scot wore nothing but his shirt; his long body was a shadow, the candlelight glowing

"It is a Catholic custom," Fraser said, his voice as stiff as his posture. "Of respect."

dim through threadbare fabric.

"Indeed." The shock of the encounter was fading, and Grey found his voice come easier. "You will pardon me, Mr. Fraser, if I find that suggestion somewhat peculiar—as is your presence here." He was growing angry now himself, feeling absurdly practiced upon—though logic told him that Fraser had risen as he did only because Grey would have stepped on him in another moment, and not with the intent of taking him at a disadvantage.

"It is immaterial to me, Major, what you find peculiar and what ye do not," Fraser said, his voice still low. "If ye wish to suppose that I have chosen to sleep in a freezing chapel in company with a corpse, rather than in my own bed, you may think as ye like." He made a motion as though to pass, obviously intending to leave the chapel—but the aisle was narrow, and Grey was not moving.

"Did you know the—the countess well?" Curiosity was overcoming shock and anger.

"The countess ... oh." Fraser glanced involuntarily over his shoulder at the coffin. Grey saw him draw breath, the mist of it briefly white. "I suppose she was. A countess. And, yes, I kent her well enough. I was her groom."

There was something peculiar about *that* remark, Grey noted with interest. There was a wealth of feeling in that statement, "I was her groom," but damned if he could tell what sort of feeling it was.

He wondered for an instant whether Fraser had been in love with Geneva—and felt a surprising sear of jealousy at the thought. Knowing Fraser's feeling for his dead wife, he would suppose ... but why in God's name would he come at night to pray by Geneva's coffin, if not—but no. That "I was her groom" had been spoken with a tone of ... hostility? Bitterness? It wasn't the respectful statement of a loyal and grieving servant, he'd swear *that* on a stack of Bibles.

Grey dismissed this confusion and took a breath of cold air and candle wax, imagining for an instant that he smelt the hint of corruption on the frigid air.

Fraser stood like a stone angel, no more than a foot from him; he could hear the Scot's breathing, faintly hoarse, congested. My God, had he been weeping? He dismissed the thought; the weather was enough to give anyone the catarrh, let alone anyone mad enough to lie half naked on freezing stones.

"I was her friend," Grey said quietly.

Fraser said nothing in reply, but continued to stand between Grey and the coffin. Grey saw him turn his head, the candle glow sparking red from brows and sprouting beard, limning the lines of his face in gold. The long throat moved once, swallowing. Then Fraser turned toward him, his face disappearing once more into shadow.

"Then I leave her in your hands 'til dawn."

It was said so quietly that Grey was not sure he'd heard it. But

something touched his hand, light as a cold wind passing, and Fraser moved past him and was gone, the muffled thud of the chapel door the only sound to mark his leaving.

Grey turned in disbelief to look, but there was nothing to be seen. The chapel was dark, and silent save for the sound of rain thrumming on the slates of the roof.

Had that remarkable encounter really happened? He thought for an instant that he might be dreaming—must have fallen asleep in his chair by the fire, lulled by the rain. But he put a hand on the end of the pew beside him and felt hard wood, cold under his fingers.

And the coffin stood before him, stark and white in the candlelight. The flames quivered, the air in the chapel disturbed, then settled, pure and steady. Keeping watch.

Not quite knowing what to do, he sat down in the front pew. He should pray, perhaps, but not yet.

What was it Fraser had said? I suppose she was. A countess.

So she had been—for the brief months of her marriage. And now there was nothing left of her or her husband, save that small, enigmatic morsel of flesh, the ninth Earl of Ellesmere.

I leave her in your hands 'til dawn.

Had Fraser himself meant to keep watch all night, prostrate before her coffin? Plainly he meant Grey to stay through the remaining hours of cold dark. Grey shifted uneasily on the hard wood, aware that he could not now bring himself to leave.

He shivered, then wrapped his cloak more tightly, resigned. The chill of the slate floor was seeping through his slippers; his feet had gone numb already. He thought of Fraser in his shirt, and shivered again at the thought of pressing his own bare flesh against the icy slates.

Respect, Fraser had said. It scarcely seemed respectful, such an extraordinary act. What, he wondered, would have happened, had he actually stepped on the man? He still held that overwhelming impression of Fraser's presence, towering, cold as stone, and pushed aside a fleeting thought of what that frozen flesh might feel like, had he touched it. Restless, he stood and went forward, drawn like a moth to the glimmering white of the coffin.

More like something from the Middle Ages, he thought, and snorted, breath white in the dark air. Those Catholic buggers who walked barefoot through Paris or flagellated themselves to bloody shreds as an act of penance.

An act of penance.

He felt the words drop into place in his mind, like the tumblers of a lock. Recalled his sense of the Dunsanys, that some deep uneasiness tinged their grief.

"Oh, Geneva," he said softly.

He saw again that vision of her at his window, pale-faced, wideeyed, adrift in the night. So cold, and all alone. The outline of the stable behind her. From somewhere in the house, he thought he heard the creak of footsteps, and a far-off infant's cry.

"Oh, my dear. What have you done?"

Chapter 8



Violent Hands

I am the Resurrection and the life, saith the Lord. He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in me, shall never die.

Well, he hoped so, to be sure. The words hadn't yet been spoken, but repeated themselves in his mind, a comforting refrain. Though another bit from the Book of Common Prayer whispered a counterpoint in the background.

... not to be used for any that die unbaptized, or excommunicate, or have laid violent hands upon themselves.

He hadn't gone to his father's funeral—didn't know if there had been one.

In spite of the weather, the church was full. The Dunsanys were liked by their tenants, friendly with most of the country gentry, and kind to their servants; everyone wished to comfort the family in its grief. Besides, it was the country, and entertainment was rare; no one would miss a good funeral, even if they were obliged to tramp through waist-deep snow to attend it.

Grey glanced over his shoulder, to see whether the tall figure of Jamie Fraser loomed among the crowd of grooms and chambermaids who stood at the back of the church, but there was no sign of the Scot. Fraser was, of course, forbidden to leave the boundaries of Helwater, but surely he would have been given leave to attend the funeral with the other servants—if he wished to.

Grey still felt the chill of his night watch in the chapel in his bones, but this deepened as he heard the rustle of anticipation at the door, and turned with everyone else to see the coffin of Ludovic, eighth Earl of Ellesmere, being brought in.

He made no attempt not to stare. Everyone was staring. The

minister had come forth, and was waiting, stone-faced, at the altar, where Geneva's coffin already stood. Grey himself had helped to carry that, dreadfully conscious of the silent weight within.

What was causing his bones to freeze within him now, though, was the sight of Jamie Fraser, tall and grim, serving as pallbearer with five other sturdy manservants.

Someone had given him coat and breeches of a cheap black worsted, very ill-fitting. He should have looked ridiculous, bony wrists protruding from the too-short sleeves, and every seam strained to bursting. As it was, he reminded Grey of a description he had read in *Demonologie*, a nasty little treatise discovered in the course of researches undertaken after his experience with the Hellfire Club.

The men set down the earl's coffin and retreated to a bench set under the gallery. Grey was not surprised in the least to see Fraser sitting alone at one end, the other men bunched unconsciously together, as far away from him as they could get.

The vicar cleared his throat with an ominous rumble, the congregation rose, flustered and murmuring, and the service began. Grey heard not a word, his responses entirely mechanical.

Could he be right? He went back and forth on the matter, unsure. On the one hand, the thought that had come to him in the darkness of the chapel seemed incredible. A complete delusion, born of grief, fatigue, and shock. On the other ... there was Lady Dunsany's behavior. Grief-stricken, certainly, but grief covering a rocklike determination. Determination to put the past behind her and raise her grandchild? Or determination to perpetrate a daring deception in order to protect him?

And Lord Dunsany, the target of his own blame—and his wife's. For arranging the marriage with Ellesmere, he'd said ... but also for allowing Geneva too much freedom. What the devil had he said, mumbling in his cups? Something about her horse, spending hours roaming the countryside, alone on her horse. *Not alone, surely. In the company of her groom,* said a cynical voice in his mind.

And then there was said groom himself, and that remarkable encounter in the middle of the night. Even though Grey had not slept, it still seemed the product of a dream. He turned deliberately in his seat and looked at Fraser. Nothing whatever showed on the Scot's face. He might have been looking back at Grey—or at something a thousand miles beyond him.

Isobel was seated next to Grey, her small, cold, black-gloved hand

held in his for support. She was no longer weeping; he thought she had simply passed the point of being able to.

Not a one of the Dunsany family had so much as glanced at Fraser, though most of the congregation had gawked openly, and many were still darting looks at him where he sat on the bench, upright and menacing as a corpse candle.

Yes, there was evidence. But his knowledge of James Fraser was evidence, as well—and he found it inconceivable that Fraser could or would have seduced a young girl, no matter what the circumstances. Let alone the daughter of his employer.

His eyes settled on the pair of coffins at the front of the church, identical beneath their white shrouds. So tragic, so ... solidly marital.

Yes, and you bloody knew Geneva, too, he thought.

The rain had turned to snow. It wouldn't stick, sodden as the ground was, but the wind drove it against the windows, bursts of hard, dry pellets that struck the glass like bird shot.

Snowflake upon snowflake, silently accumulating into a drift of what seemed like certainty—but, he reminded himself, could as easily be pure illusion.

He was light-headed from lack of sleep, and the snow-darkened windows lent the church a mournful dimness. He'd sat through the predawn hours in the freezing chapel, watching the flicker of the candle flames, and thinking.

Was his refusal to believe it purely the product of his own pride, his own guilt? Not only his belief in Jamie Fraser's honor, a refusal to believe he could be so mistaken in the man—but the knowledge that if it were true, he himself must bear a good part of the blame. He had introduced Fraser into the Dunsany household, his own honor surety for Fraser's.

He hadn't eaten this morning, too chilled and exhausted to think of food after his vigil in the chapel.

"Out of the deep have I called unto thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice."

Fraser had closed his eyes, quite suddenly, as though unable to bear what he saw. What *did* he see? Grey wondered. The Scot's face remained blank as granite, but he saw the big hands curl slowly, gathering fabric and flesh together, fingers digging so hard into the muscle of his thigh that they must leave bruises.

Was it Geneva he mourned—or his dead wife? The trouble with funerals was that they reminded one of loss. He had not seen his father's funeral, and yet had never sat through one without thought of his father, the wound of his loss healing, growing smaller through the years, but always reopened.

And if ever I saw a man bleeding internally ... he thought, watching Fraser.

"Give courage and faith to those who are bereaved, that they may have strength to meet the days ahead in the comfort of a reasonable and holy hope, in the joyful expectation of eternal life with those they love."

Well, that expectation would be a comfort, to be sure. He had no such expectation himself—only something too vague to be called hope—but he did have one certainty to anchor himself in this fog of grief and indecision. The certainty that he would get at least one answer from Jamie Fraser. Maybe two.



It was only four o'clock, but the winter sun had set, leaving a thin slice of pale light above the fells. The temperature had dropped and the snow had thickened; already the highest rocks showed a rime of white, and large, wet flakes struck Grey's coat and stuck melting to his hair and lashes as he made his way to the stables.

He had seen the other two grooms helping to bring round horses and harness teams for those nearby funeral guests who were departing today, but there had been no sign of Fraser. Not surprising; Lord Dunsany preferred "MacKenzie" to remain out of sight when there was company. His size, his aspect, and, above all, his Highland speech tended to unnerve some people. Grey had heard some comments regarding the tall, red-haired servant who bore Ellesmere's coffin, but most did not realize that he was Dunsany's servant, rather than that of the Earl of Ellesmere—and few, so far as he knew, had realized that the man was Scottish, let alone a paroled Jacobite.

Sure enough, he discovered Fraser in the stable block, pitching feed for the stalled horses, and came up beside him.

"May I speak with you, Mr. Fraser?"

The Scot didn't turn, but lifted one shoulder.

"I dinna see any way of preventing ye, Major," he said. Despite the words, this did not sound unfriendly; only wary.

"I would ask you a question, sir."

He was watching Fraser's face closely, in the glow of the single lantern, and saw the wide mouth tighten a little. Fraser only nodded, though, and dug his fork into the waiting mound of hay.

"Regarding some gentlemen intimately connected with the Stuart cause," Grey said, and received a sudden startled look—mingled with an undeniable impression of relief.

"The Stuart cause?" Fraser repeated, and turned his back on Grey, shoulders bunching as he dug the fork into a pile of hay. "To which ... gentlemen ... do ye refer, Major?"

Grey was conscious of his heart beating heavily in his chest, and took especial care that his voice might be under his control at this delicate juncture.

"I understand that you were an intimate friend to—" he nearly said, "to the Young Pretender," but bit that off and said instead, "to Charles Stuart."

"That—" Fraser began, but stopped as suddenly as he had begun. He deposited the forkload of hay neatly into one manger, and moved to pick up another. "I knew him," he said, voice colorless.

"Quite. Am I to understand also that you knew the names of some important supporters of the Pretender in England?"

Fraser glanced at him, face inscrutable in the lantern light.

"Many of them," he said quietly. He looked back to the fork in his hands, drove it down into the hay. "Does it matter now?"

Not to Fraser, surely. Nor to Hector, or the other dead of Culloden. But to the living ...

"If any of them are still alive, I imagine it matters," he said. "Those who did not declare themselves at the time would scarcely wish their connexions exposed, even now."

Fraser made a noise of soft derision through his nose.

"Oh, aye. I shall denounce them, I suppose, and thus gain pardon from your king?"

"Your king, as well," Grey said pointedly. "It is possible that you could." More than possible. The anti-Jacobite hysteria of the years before the Rising had eased somewhat—but treason was a crime whose stain did not fade; he had good reason to know it.

Fraser straightened. He let go of the fork and looked directly at him,

his eyes so dark a blue that they reminded Grey of cathedral slates—darkened by age and the tread of feet, nearly black in the pooling shadows, but so enduring as to long outlast the feet that trampled them.

"If I would trade honor for my life—or for freedom—would I not have done it at my trial?"

"Perhaps you could not, then; you would have lain in danger from those Jacobites still at large."

This attempt to goad Fraser was in vain; the Scot merely looked at him, with the expression of one regarding a turd in the street.

"Or perhaps you realized that such information as you possessed was not of sufficient value to interest anyone," Grey suggested, unwilling—or unable—to give up. Fraser would have been compelled to swear an oath of loyalty to King George when he was given his life following Culloden, but Grey knew better than to try an appeal to that.

"I have said nothing regarding it, Major," Fraser replied coolly. "If what I ken has value to anyone, it is to yourself, I should say."

"What makes you say that?" Grey's heart was hammering against his ribs, but he strove to match Fraser's even tone.

"It is a dozen years past the death of the Stuart cause," Fraser pointed out. "And I havena been besieged by persons desiring to discover my knowledge of those affairs connected with it. They asked at my trial, aye—but even then, without great interest in my answer."

The dark blue gaze roved over him, detached and cynical.

"Do your own fortunes fare so badly, then, that ye seek to mend them wi' the bones of the dead?"

"With the—" Belatedly, he realized that Fraser spoke poetically, rather than literally.

"This has nothing to do with my own fortunes," he said. "But as to the dead—yes. I have no concern for those Jacobites still alive. If there are any left, they may go to the devil or the Pope as they please."

He felt rather like a boy he had once seen at a zoological garden in Paris, who had poked a stick into a dozing tiger's cage. The beast had not snarled, nor thrown himself at the bars, but the slanted eyes had opened slowly, fixing upon the child in such a manner that the benighted urchin had dropped his stick and stood frozen, until his mother had dragged him away.

"The dead," Fraser repeated, eyes fixed on Grey's face in that intent,

unnerving fashion. "What is it that ye seek from the dead, then?"

"A name. Just one."

"Which one?"

Grey felt a sense of dread come over him that paralyzed his limbs and dried his tongue. And yet it must be asked.

"Grey," he said hoarsely. "Gerard Grey. Duke. Duke of Pardloe. Was he—" Saliva failed him; he tried to swallow, but could not.

Fraser's gaze had sharpened; the dark blue eyes were brilliant, narrowed in the dimness.

"A duke," he said. "Your father?"

Grey could only nod, despising himself for his weakness.

Fraser grunted; impossible to tell if it was with surprise—or satisfaction. He thought for a moment, eyes hooded, then shook his head.

"No."

"You will not tell me?"

It was surprise. Fraser frowned a little at him, puzzled.

"I mean the answer is no. I have never seen that name written among those of King James's supporters, nor have I ever heard it spoken."

He was regarding Grey with considerable interest—as well he might, Grey thought. He could see unspoken questions moving in the Scot's eyes, but knew they would remain unspoken—as would his own, regarding Geneva Dunsany.

He himself felt something between vast relief and crushing disappointment. He had steeled himself to know the worst, and met only a blank wall. He longed to press Fraser further, but that would be pointless. Whatever else Fraser might be, Grey had no doubt of his honesty. He might have refused to answer, but answer he had, and Grey was compelled to accept it at face value.

That the answer still left room for doubt—perhaps Fraser had not been sufficiently intimate with the inner councils of the Jacobite cause as to be told such an important name, perhaps the duke had died too long before Fraser joined the cause—or perhaps the duke had been clever enough to remain successfully hidden from everyone save the Stuarts themselves ...

"The Stuart court leaks like a sieve, Major." The voice came quietly from the shadows. Fraser had turned his back again, resuming his work. "If your father had any connexion whatever with the Stuarts and remained unknown—he was a verra clever man."

"Yes," Grey said bleakly. "Yes, he was. I thank you, Mr. Fraser."

He received no answer save the rustle of hay, and left the stable, followed by the whickering of horses and Fraser's tuneless whistle. Outside, the world had turned a soft, featureless white.



The fact that Fraser *had* answered him reinforced Grey's suspicions regarding Geneva. The encounter in the chapel was not mentioned, but the memory of it was clear between them. His honor would not permit him to mention it, lest it be taken as a threat—but the threat was implied. Had he made it explicit, Fraser's honor—and his temper —would likely have caused him to throw it back in Grey's face, stubbornly refusing to say a word and daring him to take action.

So he had something. It wasn't proof, either of Fraser's relationship with Geneva or of his own father's innocence—but food for thought, nonetheless.

He kept thinking, and while he did not see Fraser again before his departure, those thoughts moved him to one final trial of curiosity.

"Might I pay my respects to the new earl before I go?" he asked, hoping that he sounded as though he were jesting.

Lady Dunsany looked startled, but Isobel of course found nothing odd in his request, assuming that naturally the world shared in her admiration for her new nephew, and led him happily up to the nursery.

The sun was shining—a pale and watery winter sun, but still sun—and the nursery seemed peaceful and calm. The curtains hung motionless in the schoolroom, and Isobel did not glance at the window where he had shown her how to break things.

The ninth Earl of Ellesmere was lying in a basket, swaddled to the chin in blankets, a woolly cap pulled snugly down over his ears. The child was awake, though; it thoughtfully inserted a fist in its mouth, round eyes fixed on Grey—or possibly on the ceiling; it was difficult to tell.

"May I?" Without waiting for the nurse's permission, Grey scooped the child carefully up into his arms. He was noticeably heavy. He said as much, which caused both Isobel and the nurse to go off into raptures regarding the infant's voraciousness, capacity, and various other revolting details not suitable for discussion in mixed company, in Grey's opinion.

Still, he let them chatter, interjecting the occasional, "Ah?" of interest, and looking covertly into the child's face. It looked like a pudding, slightly wet and glistening. It had eyes, to be sure—and he thought them blue, but his cousin Olivia had informed him that all children's eyes were blue at birth. Its other features appeared negligible at best.

The woolly cap had strings, tied beneath the infant's chin, and he nudged these with a thumb, thinking that he might be able to pry them up over the chin and thus dislodge the cap for a moment.

This seemed to annoy the infant, though; he contorted his face, went red, and emitted a high-pitched shriek, which caused Nanny Elspeth to snatch him protectively from Grey's arms. She patted the little back soothingly, giving Grey a look of marked disapproval.

"I only wondered—has he any hair?" Grey asked, in desperation. That produced a complete alteration in the women's attitude; from reproach, they turned all eagerness, vying with each other to remove the baby's cap and demonstrate the virtues of its scalp.

The child *did* have hair. A soft darkish slick that ran down the center of its head like the stripe on a Spanish donkey.

"May I?"

The nurse looked as though she would prefer to hand the child over to a convicted ax murderer, but as Isobel nodded encouragingly, she reluctantly surrendered the little creature to Grey's dubious care again.

He took a firm hold on the infant, making soft whistling noises through his teeth; that usually worked on strange dogs. He strolled to and fro across the room, joggling it gently, meanwhile maneuvering the little creature as unobtrusively as possible, so as to get the light behind it.

He *thought* there was a reddish tinge to the hair—but could not swear to it.

"Is he not lovely?" Isobel petted the tiny stripe of hair lovingly. "I think he will look like my sister—see? He has her hair, I'm sure of it."

With a sense of chagrin, Grey realized that, indeed, Geneva *had* had hair of a deep chestnut color. No answers here, then. He was trying to think how to return the child to the women without rudeness, but the boy settled the matter himself, by emitting a loud belch and decanting a remarkably large quantity of partially digested milk over Grey's shoulder.

"Does he not make you wish to marry at once and have children of your own?" Isobel asked, fondly patting the baby's back as the nursemaid—with bad grace—swabbed the offending mess from Grey's clothes.

"I do believe I can contain my impatience," he said, and both women laughed as though he had made some clever jest.

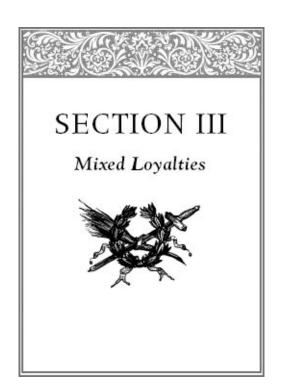
"Oh, look!" Isobel peered at the infant in delight. "He's smiling, Lord John. He likes you!"

"Well, in fact ..." the nursemaid began, eyeing the child's rapidly reddening face thoughtfully, "I do believe ..."

"Oh, dear!" said Isobel. A most unusual odor—sweet but foul—filled the air.

"I'm sure the sentiment is mutual," Grey said politely, and bowed toward the infant. "Your servant, sir."

It was not until he and Tom were halfway back to London that it occurred to him that he had never thought to ask the infant's name.



Chapter 9



Unnatural Acts

Grey returned from the stark silence of the fells to a London in ferment.

As Hal had predicted, the printers had got hold of Ffoulkes's French family connexions and unearthed the hints of unsavory conspiracy; Ffoulkes's wife had fled the country and was presumably in France; another conspirator, a lawyer named Jeffords, had been arrested and was to be tried along with Captain Bates and Harrison Otway on a variety of charges ranging from lewd conduct to sodomy, conspiracy to commit unnatural acts, and, as a definite afterthought, conspiracy to assassinate various justices and ministers—presumably those who had been most outspoken about the need to crush this abominable vice.

"Not, I see, on charges of treason," Grey remarked to his brother, crumpling a broadsheet with a cartoon illustrating two of the conspirators engaging in one of these unnatural acts and tossing it into the fire in Hal's office. "As you suspected."

Hal shrugged moodily.

"Doesn't take a fortune-teller to see that Bernard Adams and that lot would strongly prefer a nice sodomitical conspiracy to outrage the public and keep them distracted than alarming news of a gang of traitors who came damned near to cutting Adams's throat and did manage to pass a great deal of damaging information to their master in France. To say nothing of fifteen thousand pounds—though I take leave to doubt that it all went to France."

"They did?"

"They did. It's been kept very quiet, but Bates sent a note to Adams, cool as dammit, and inveigled him into meeting privately in the yard of a tavern in Lambeth, saying he—Bates, that is—had something of advantage to confide. Adams went, the idiot, and only escaped being killed because Bates missed his footing on a patch of mud, allowing the fool time to shout for help. Adams was wounded, and Bates escaped, of course, but they caught him—trying to make it to Ireland, evidently."

"Yes, I gather he has an Irish mistress."

Hal blinked at him.

"He does? Who told you that?"

Realizing that it might be impolitic to reveal his conversation with Minnie, Grey merely shrugged, as though it were common rumor.

"Who told you all this?" he asked.

"Harry. Likely got it from his half brother, Joffrey."

"Much more likely from Lady Joffrey," Grey observed, and Hal made a brief grimace of agreement.

A sudden grinding noise made Grey's head jerk round. In the corner stood a large wooden cabinet, which to this point he had assumed to be part of one of Mr. Beasley's futile efforts to bring some semblance of order to Hal's office. The doors to this swung slowly open, revealing a figure inside, and he clapped a hand to his dagger with an exclamation.

"It's all right." Hal was still cross, but his voice showed a tinge of amusement. "It's only an automaton."

This was by now apparent; the cabinet contained a life-size figure, or rather half of one; the thing ended at the waist, the bottom half of the cabinet presumably being filled with the clockwork mechanism whose whirring had attracted Grey's attention. Going closer to examine this object, he discovered the figure to be made of wax, wood, and metal, gaily painted to resemble the popular conception of a native of India, complete to kohl-rimmed eyes, red lips, and gauzy turban.

He put out a hand to touch it, then jerked the hand back as a loud clank came from the machine. The figure leaned abruptly toward him in sinister fashion, but proved only to be inserting a stiff hand into a jar placed before it. More clanking and whirring, a long pause ... and the figure snapped back into its original position, one arm swinging up so violently that it nearly struck Grey in the face.

"What the devil?"

"It's a fortune-teller," Hal said, quite unnecessarily. He was openly amused by this time.

"So I see." The figure's metal fingers held out a bit of folded paper, which Grey took gingerly and opened.

"The greatest danger could be your own stupidity," he read aloud. He refolded the paper and dropped it back in the jar. "Very nice. Where on earth did you get this?"

"Sergeant-Major Weems confiscated it from the O'Higginses," Hal said. "Put it in here for safekeeping until he can discover whom they stole it from."

"You'd think it wouldn't be difficult to trace the owner." Grey walked round the cabinet, examining it. It was battered and scarred, though originally of very good manufacture.

Hal shrugged.

"They claim they won it in a dice game."

"Yes, well." Grey dismissed the automaton and sat down again. "You said the conspirators did succeed in getting material to France?"

"Adams says they did. Whilst he was frolicking on the river with Bates, Otway and Jeffords evidently burgled his house and took the contents of his safe, which included roughly fifteen thousand pounds: the property of His Majesty, intended to be handed over next day to the paymasters of two regiments bound for France. In the kerfuffle over all this, several offices in Whitehall discovered they were also missing assorted bits of important paper—though my personal suspicion is that they've leapt at the opportunity to blame any lapses in their bookkeeping on this so-called conspiracy."

"Rather enterprising for a gang of sodomites," Grey remarked, fascinated. "What are they supposed to have intended doing with the money—holding orgies of disgusting vice?"

"God knows. The last newspaper I read speculated that they proposed emigrating to France—using the stolen money to insure their welcome—where presumably disgusting vice flourishes unchecked in the streets."

"Were the documents and money recovered?"

Hal leaned back in his chair.

"No, they weren't. None of the conspirators had any suspicious material on them when they were arrested, and it wasn't found in Ffoulkes's house following his suicide—so the supposition is that Louis of France now has it." Hal grimaced, as though his breakfast hadn't agreed with him. "And speaking of France ..."

Grey looked up sharply, hearing a new note in his brother's voice.

"Yes?"

"We aren't going there."

"What?"

"The regiment's orders have been changed. Read that." Hal extracted a letter from the mess on his desk and threw it in front of Grey. It was from the Ministry of War, and in a few curt lines, ordered the 1st /46th to join with the forces of Duke Ferdinand of Brunswick, in Prussia.

"No explanation?" Grey raised a brow at his brother, who glowered back.

"No. Not that I need one. It's frigging Twelvetrees's doing."

Twelvetrees. That name rang bells of warning, and within a moment, Grey had recollected why. "Nathaniel Twelvetrees?" Grey hazarded. "The gentleman with whom you—"

"Nathaniel Twelvetrees is dead, and so is the matter to which you refer." Hal's voice was flat, but his eyes dared Grey to say more on pain of death. "This is his elder brother. Colonel in the Royal Artillery."

"I see."

Which he did. While Hal had succeeded in regaining something of the family honor by his military efforts, he had done it with the assistance of capable men, dedicated soldiers such as Harry Quarry, whom he had lured away from the Buffs with the promise of higher rank and freedom of authority. Other regiments—such as the Royal Artillery—boasted officers of privilege and noble family, if not any pronounced military skills. Such men would want nothing to do with Lord Melton's disgrace, or his regiment. Consequently, Hal could not rely on so many of the favors and connexions that gave some other regiments preferment.

Evidently, Colonel Twelvetrees thought the French campaign offered more scope and opportunity for distinction in battle, and wished to deprive the 46th of such opportunity. From what Grey knew of the war in Prussia, it was likely to be a long, drawn-out affair, with the Duke of Brunswick's troops—which they would be joining as allies—at a numerical disadvantage.

Likewise, the English formed a smaller part of the army on the Prussian front, and would therefore have less influence in the management of the campaign.

"Well," Grey said at last. "The beer is better."

Hal's bad temper at last gave way, and he laughed, if reluctantly.

"Yes, that's something. And at least you speak German. I'll need you by me, so they don't slip anything past us."

"Percival Wainwright speaks German, as well," Grey said, and his heart jumped. He touched his waistcoat pocket, where the lock of dark hair lay curled in secrecy.

"Does he?" Hal was interested. "Good. Will you have time to show him his business? He signed his papers of commission this morning. I can turn him over to Wilmot or Brabham-Griggs, if you'd rather, but as you seemed to get on with him—"

"No, I can do that," Grey assured him, rising. "Do you know where I might find him today? Is he at the barracks?"

"No. Actually, he's at Mother's house, being fitted with a suit for the wedding. I narrowly escaped myself. Oh—which reminds me: Olivia said if you turned up here, I was to send you home at once to be measured."

"All right." This suited him excellently well, though he had his reservations regarding Olivia's taste. "She isn't insisting upon yellow velvet, is she?"

"No, but she said something about persimmon waistcoats."

Grey glanced suspiciously at his brother, who looked back with a perfect bland innocence.

"You wouldn't recognize a persimmon if you sat on it," Grey said, "and nor would Olivia."

He was nearly out the door, when he remembered.

"That page of Father's journal," he said abruptly, turning back. "Did you speak to Mother? Have you learned any more about it?"

Something flickered in his brother's eyes, and then was gone.

"No," Hal said casually, returning his attention to the stack of papers on his desk. "Not a thing."



Grey did not go home immediately, in spite of the presence there of Percy Wainwright. Instead, he crossed the courtyard and went upstairs to see if Harry Quarry was in his own office.

He was, leaning back in his chair, and apparently asleep, a half-dried quill stuck to a blotted page in a copybook on the desk before him.

"Practicing your penmanship, Harry?" Grey said, in a normal tone of voice. Quarry opened one bleary eye, reached out a hand, and flipped the book closed, the quill still inside it.

"Don't bellow, there's a good chap," Quarry said, pressing both hands against his temples, apparently in hope of keeping the contents of his head from escaping.

"Late night, was it?" Grey pulled up a stool and leaned on the desk, eyeing his friend.

"I believe I've eaten something that disagreed with me," Quarry

said with dignity, and stifled a belch by way of illustration.

"Really? What was her name?"

Quarry burst into a violent coughing fit that left his wig askew and his face empurpled.

"You *hound*," he said hoarsely, tenderly patting his chest. "What the devil d'you want, anyway?"

Grey rocked back a little on the stool.

"Since you ask—Harry, do you happen to know how one Nathaniel Twelvetrees died?"

Quarry's eyes flew open. He drew breath, and coughed some more. Grey waited patiently. Quarry frowned, pursed his lips, sighed—and gave up.

"Died following a duel with your brother. Not a secret; a good many people know."

"You were there?" Grey asked, picking up something in Quarry's voice. Harry grimaced.

"I was Melton's second. Twelvetrees shot first, mind. Nicked Melton in the thigh, but he didn't fall. Staggered a bit, to be sure, but managed his aim and got Twelvetrees through the upper arm. Honor satisfied all round, should have been the end of it and no one the wiser. Only Twelvetrees's wound turned septic and he died." Harry shrugged. "Bad luck. Still, Twelvetrees insisted on his deathbed that it was a private affair, and it stayed that way. They're an honorable family. Cold as death," he added fairly, "but honorable."

"I don't suppose I need ask what was the cause of the duel." Grey rubbed a hand over his face, feeling suddenly tired. He needed a shave.

"No, I don't suppose you do. I heard you'd seen the betting book at White's."

"Who told you that?"

"Oh, twenty or thirty people, so far." Harry adjusted his wig, eyeing Grey. "Melton wasn't one of them."

"No, I don't suppose he would be." Grey made no attempt to disguise the edge in his voice. "Why did he challenge Twelvetrees? Obviously the duel happened after the wager was made. Dr. Longstreet told me Hal had wanted to fight Twelvetrees and the rest to begin with, but cooler heads prevailed—that would be you, perhaps, Harry?"

Quarry's heavy brows went up.

"How do you know he challenged Twelvetrees, and not t'other way

around?" Harry asked.

Grey shrugged. The choice of weapon had to have been Twelvetrees's; Hal would always fight with a sword, if he could.

"Why did he do it after all? What did Twelvetrees do?"

"That," Quarry said definitely, "is not my secret to tell. Ask your brother, if you want to know."

Grey made a rude noise.

"I couldn't get the name of his tailor out of him with a corkscrew in his present mood. Tell me this, then—did he tell you about the page from my father's journal?"

Quarry's eyes opened wide, startled and bloodshot.

"About what?"

"Oh, he didn't." Grey felt obscurely pleased at that. At least he wasn't the only one excluded from Hal's confidence. He stood up and shook his coat into order.

"All right, then. I'm going home. You know Percy Wainwright's bought in?"

"God have mercy on his soul," Quarry said, but the jest was automatic. He reached across and gripped Grey's arm.

"John," he said, his voice unexpectedly gentle, "leave it. Your father's long dead."

"Thank you, Harry," Grey said, and meant it. He detached his arm from Quarry's grip, patting his friend's hand. "But I'm not," he whispered, and went out.



He left his horse in the barracks stable and walked to Jermyn Street, managing by the exercise both to work out the kinks of riding and to ease his mind a little. If Hal thought he could be brushed off like an annoying insect, Hal could think again. Still, Hal hadn't told Harry about the journal page, so it wasn't only himself his brother was keeping secrets from. Harry had not been with the regiment much above a year—he'd come over from the Buffs—but he was one of Hal's oldest friends.

At least he would have the upper hand in Germany, he thought. He was himself just as pleased by the change of orders; he liked many things about Germany—beer among them—and had numerous friends among the Prussians and their allies. And as Percy Wainwright *did*

speak German, as well ... The thought of Wainwright quite restored his good humor, and he swung whistling down the street and in at his mother's gate.

He found Percy Wainwright with Olivia, a sempstress, the sempstress's assistant, and Olivia's maid, all in a state of hilarity over the fitting of Percy's suit, which did not appear to be going well.

His first sight, in fact, was of Percy's bum, clad in linen drawers and exposed to view as Percy bent to touch his toes, indicating a tendency of the so-far sleeveless and skirtless coat to pull across the back.

"You see?" Percy was saying. The women, seeing Grey in the doorway, burst into laughter.

"Well, yes, I do," Grey said, endeavoring not to laugh himself, but failing, as Percy shot upright and whirled round, wide-eyed. Grey bowed, hand on heart. "Your servant, sir."

"I fear you take me at a disadvantage, sir," Percy said with mock dignity, whipping a pair of half-finished cream silk breeches off the settee and wrapping his loins in them.

If we were alone, I certainly would, Grey thought, and allowed some hint of this to show in his smile. Percy caught the hint; a higher color rose in his cheeks, already flushed. He held Grey's eyes for a fraction of a second, his own alight with speculation—and acceptance—before joining in the general laughter.

"Johnny! How quick you've been! I didn't think you'd come 'til teatime." Olivia waddled forward and went a-tiptoe, straining over her bulge to kiss his cheek. "Here, you try this coat. Perhaps it will fit you better."

He felt his own face grow warm at the notion of publicly disrobing—even partially—in the presence of Percy Wainwright, but the latter was grinning at his discomfiture, and he allowed himself to be stripped of his uniform coat and waistcoat, though he did retain his shirt and breeches. Catching, as he did so, a brief glimpse of Percy, bare-legged and clad only in drawers, as the latter wrapped himself in Grey's banyan, Olivia having evidently stolen this garment from his room.

Grey turned his back hastily, thrusting an arm randomly through what he hoped was the proper hole of the coat the sempstress held for him. The fabric was a heavy silk velvet of a midnight blue, and it was still warm from Percy's body. He bit the inside of his cheek, and tasted blood.

The sempstress, herself flushed and laughing, but still attentive to

business, was circling him with a bit of chalk and a calculating eye, making him raise and lower his arms, move to and fro. Breaking out in a dew of sweat, he bent over at her order, remembering too late that he'd worn the stained doeskin breeches for riding.

Further outbreaks of hilarity, this time at his expense, but he didn't mind. He had a momentary qualm when the sempstress knelt at his feet to pin a waist seam, but she merely flushed a little more and cast her eyes modestly down, her shy smile making it evident that she considered it a personal compliment; she was a handsome young woman, and likely had had such before.

Percy Wainwright knew where the compliment lay. He laughed with the girls, teasing and making comments, but his gaze kept returning to Grey, alive with interest. He had left off his wig, and at one point, he casually ran a hand through his short-clipped hair, as though to order the dark curls, and glanced at Grey.

Did you get it, then? his upraised eyebrow said.

Grey raised his own.

Percy grinned at him, but glanced away a moment too soon, and when he looked back now and then, Percy was always engaged in conversation with Olivia, a maid, or Tom—who had arrived belatedly and was experiencing loudly audible mortification over Grey's breeches.

What was this? he wondered. He was not mistaken in the attraction; he knew that for certain. And he had not had any indication during their previous conversations that Percy was either light-minded or flirtatious in the least. Perhaps it was only caution, he told himself—a reluctance, lest anyone notice what was going on between them.

When they had at last resumed their usual garments and the sempstress and her assistant departed with armloads of blue velvet, he made occasion to brush shoulders with Percy at the door of the drawing room.

"Melton tells me I am to have the honor to familiarize you with the ways of the regiment, your duties and the like. If you have time this afternoon ...?" For the first time, he regretted staying in his mother's house. Though officers' quarters in the barracks would not have been much better. How far away were Percy's rooms?

"I should like that more than I can say," Percy replied. "But I am, alas, engaged." The regret in his voice seemed real, but Grey experienced it as a small blow, nonetheless.

"Perhaps tomorrow—" he began, but saw Percy grimace in apology.

"My engagement is in—in Bath," he said quickly. "I shall not be back for two or three days. I should in fact have left this morning—I will be very late—save that I hoped to have a chance of seeing you before I left," he added softly. He looked directly at Grey as he said this, and Grey felt some easing of his disappointment, if not his baser urges.

Bath, my eye, he thought. But after all, the man was surely entitled to his privacy, if he did not wish to say what his engagement was. Percy owed him nothing—yet.

"Find me upon your return, then," he said. He clapped Percy briefly on the shoulder. "Safe journey." He turned, and without looking back, went out in search of some privacy of his own.

Chapter 10



Salle des Armes

He returned in the evening, to discover that the dowager countess had likewise come back from her excursion. He went to her boudoir to pay his respects, and found her cheerful, if a little pale from her journey, and with a few lines of worry round her eyes. These, he took to be the natural effects of her discovery of the extent of Olivia's ambitions as a wedding planner.

He did his best to distract her, therefore, with the story of the afternoon's fitting, nobly sacrificing his own dignity in order to include his stained breeches and Percy's drawers.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear—poor Tom!" The countess made small snorting noises. "He does take his position very seriously, God help the poor lad. I think you must be a very great trial to him."

"Yes, he was in hopes that Percy Wainwright might be a macaroni—you could quite see visions of embroidered waist coats and clocked silk stockings dance in his head—but I was obliged to dash his hopes, alas."

The countess smiled afresh at that, but her voice was serious.

"Do you like Percy Wainwright?"

"Yes," he answered, rather surprised that she would ask. "Yes, we get on quite well together. Common interests, and the like." He trusted that no hint of just how common those interests were showed on his face. He cleared his throat and added, "I like the general, too, Mother—very much."

"Oh, do you?" Her face softened. "I'm glad of that, John. He's a very fine man—and so kind." She pursed her lips then, though still with a look of amusement. "I am not sure your brother is quite as taken with him. But then, Hal is always so suspicious, poor boy. I really think sometimes that he trusts no one but you and his wife. Well, and Harry Quarry, to be sure."

The mention of his brother reminded Grey. In the flurry of his return from Helwater, the preparations for the wedding, and the regiment's new orders, he had momentarily forgotten. But surely Hal had had sufficient time to speak with her by now.

"Mother—did Hal mention to you the page from Father's journal

that we discovered in his office?"

If he'd thought her slightly pale before, he'd been mistaken. He'd seen her pale with fatigue and white with fury. Now, though, the blood washed from her face in an instant, and the look of fear in her eyes was unmistakable.

"Did he?" he repeated, trying to sound casual. "I rather wondered whether perhaps you had had one, too. Delivered by post, perhaps?"

She looked up at him, her eyes quick and fierce.

"What makes you think that?"

"The way you spoke of James Fraser when I departed for Helwater," he told her frankly. "Something must have disturbed you quite suddenly, for you to take such note of the man; you have known of him for years. But since the only thing you do know of him is that he was once a prominent Jacobite ...?" He paused delicately, but she said nothing. Her eyes were still blazing like a burning glass, but she wasn't looking at him any longer. Whatever she was looking at lay a good way beyond him.

"Yes," she said at last, her voice remote. She blinked once and looked at him, her gaze still sharp, but no longer burning. "Your father always said you were the cleverest of the boys." This wasn't said in a complimentary tone. "As for 'was once a prominent Jacobite'—there is no 'was' about it, John. Believe me, once a Papist, always a Papist."

He forbore pointing out that "Papist" and "Jacobite" were not invariably the same thing. When politics entered the room, principle often flew out the window. While most Papists had indeed supported the Stuart cause, there were not a few Protestants who had as well, either from personal opportunism or from a sincere conviction that James Stuart was the divinely appointed sovereign of Great Britain, his religion notwithstanding.

"So you did receive a page from that journal," he said, making it a statement, rather than a question. "May I see it?"

"I burnt it."

"What for?" He all but barked at her, and she blinked again, startled. She eyed him then, obviously choosing her words.

"Because," she said evenly, "I did not wish to keep it. Have you heard the expression, John, 'Let the dead bury the dead'? What's past is past, and I shan't cling to its remnants."

He struggled for a moment against the impulse to say something regrettable—but then his eye fell upon the miniature on her dressing table. It had stood there since the day Gerard Grey had given it to her, and it was years since John Grey had ceased to notice it. Noticing it now, he was taken aback to see just how much the portrait resembled the image he saw in his shaving mirror. His father had been darker in coloring, but otherwise ... So much for his mother's chance of forgetting the past, then, even if she wanted to.

"Really, Mother," he said mildly, "you are the most atrocious liar. What are you afraid of?"

"What? What the devil do you mean by that?" she exclaimed indignantly. She didn't curse often, and he invariably found it amusing when she did, but he suppressed his smile.

"I mean," he said patiently, gesturing at the miniature, "that if you wish to convince the world that you have lost all thought for my father, you ought to remove that from sight. And when you tell people you have destroyed something," he added, nodding at her secretary, "you ought not to glance at the place where you've hidden it."

She opened her mouth, but found nothing to say, and closed it again. She looked at him, eyes narrowed.

"If you don't want that journal page," he said, "I do."

"No," she said at once.

"Does it contain something so dangerous, then? Have you shown it to Hal?" Despite himself, a tinge of anger was creeping into his words. "I'm no longer twelve, Mother."

She looked at him for a long moment, the oddest expression of regret flitting across her face.

"More's the pity," she said. Her shoulders sagged then, and she bowed her head and turned away, rubbing two fingers between her brows.

"I'll think about it, John," she said. "More, I can't promise you. Now leave me, do; I've a dreadful headache."

"Liar," he said again, but without heat. "I'll send your maid, shall I?"

"Please."

He went out, then, but at the door turned back and stuck his head through.

"Mother?"

"Yes?"

"If you wish to convince someone that you aren't afraid—look them in the eye. Good night."



Percy Wainwright, it transpired, had never so much as touched a sword, let alone used one with violent intent. In order to remedy this shocking lack, he agreed amiably enough, upon his return from Bath, to go with Grey and Melton to their usual weekly practice, for the purpose of basic instruction.

The *salle des armes* favored by the Greys was in Monmouth Street, a small, dingy building wedged between a pawnbroker's and a mercer's shop near St. Giles, and run by a small Sicilian gentleman whose skill with the blade was surpassed only by the individuality of his idiom.

"Gets you fat-fat," *Signor* Berculi said without preamble, rudely poking Hal in his very flat stomach. "No practice, two weeks! Some *pidocchio* do the business on you, stick a rapier up you fat arse."

Hal, quite accustomed to *Signor* Berculi, ignored this pleasantry and introduced Mr. Wainwright as a new addition to the family and to the regiment.

The *Signor* circled Percy, shaking his head and biting his finger in dismay. Percy looked mildly apprehensive, but the glance he shot Grey was filled with amusement.

"So old, so old!" *Signor* Berculi mourned, halting in front of Percy and prodding him critically in the upper arm. He waved a small, callused hand at Grey. "That one, sword in cradle. You? Pah!" He spat, shook himself violently, then crossed himself.

"Come," he said, resigned, and seized Percy by the sleeve. "You lunge. No stick you foot, all right?"

While Percy was rapidly stripped to his shirt and breeches, given a battered rapier with no point, and set to lunging, the Greys stripped for action.

"En garde." Hal fell naturally into his stance, knee bent, rapier forward, the side of his body turned toward Grey, left hand held gracefully up behind his head.

"J'ai regardé." Grey tapped his blade lightly against Hal's, and held it crossed. Signor Berculi, circling them with beady eyes narrowed for flaws in form, shouted, "Commencez!" and they began.

It was an exhibition of form to begin with, neither man seeking actual advantage but only an opening in which to try a *coupé* or *passe avant*, circling slowly as their muscles loosened.

Grey saw Percy's eyes upon them, interested, until *Signor* Berculi spotted his distraction and drove him back to his lunging with a bark.

He breathed deep, intoxicated by the smell of sweat, old and fresh, the metal tang of the swords, and the rub of the hilt on the heel of his hand. He loved to fight with the rapier; it was so light, he was barely conscious of it as anything more than an extension of his body.

He and his brother were evenly matched physically, being of a height, with Hal having a few pounds the advantage in weight, and Grey perhaps an inch more in reach. Despite this evident equality—and the fact that Hal was a fine swordsman—Grey knew himself to be better.

He seldom demonstrated that knowledge in their practice bouts, knowing equally well that Hal hated to lose and would be in bad temper if he did. Now, though, he found himself pressing, ever so slightly, and realized with a glance at Percy and a small tingling of his flesh that he meant to win today, no matter what the consequence.

"Have you any further news of the conspirators?" Grey asked, as much in order to distract his brother as from curiosity.

Hal met his thrust with a strong riposte, beat, and went for a thrust in *quarte*, which failed.

"They go to trial this week," he said briefly.

"I have"—a beat, beat back, feint in *prime*, and he touched Hal's shoulder, barely, and smiled—"have not seen mention of it in the papers."

"You will." Grunting, Hal lunged, and he barely turned aside in time.

"They"—Hal was beginning to breathe hard by now, and the words emerged in brief bursts—"decided to—do as I said—they would."

"To suppress the political aspects of the case?" Grey was still breathing easily. "Say 'Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.'"

"She sells—sea shells—by the frigging seashore! Damn your eyes!" A fusillade of beats and a vicious thrust that missed his chest so narrowly that Grey felt the blade glide along his shirtfront.

"Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers, Peter Piper picked a peck of pippled pickers, Peter P—" Laughing—and beginning to gasp himself—he left off, and fought.

Beat, beat, feint, a half skip back as Hal's point lunged past his face, another, Hal was leaning too far forward—no, he'd caught himself, jumped back in the nick of time as Grey's blade came up. A lunge in *tierce*, in *tierce* again without let, and dust flew up from the stamp of his foot on the boards.

Hal had caught what he was about; he could feel Hal's thoughts as

though they were inside his own head, feel the edge of astonished annoyance change, anger rising, then the jerk as Hal caught himself, forced himself to restraint, to something colder and more cautious.

Grey himself had no such restraint. He was happily off his head, drunk with the lust of fighting. His body felt like oiled rope, tensile and slippery, and he was taking dangerous chances, completely confident that he could elude Hal's point, regardless. He saw an opening, dropped into a flattened lunge with a yell, and his buttoned point struck Hal's thigh and skidded across the fabric of his breeches.

"Jesus!" said Hal, and swung at his head.

He ducked, laughing, and popped up like a jack-in-the-box, grabbing the point of his rapier so the blade bowed between his hands, then let go and snapped it off Hal's, making the metal ring and the sword jump in Hal's hand.

He heard Berculi swear in Italian, but had no attention to spare. Hal was fighting back in earnest now, beating at his blade fit to break them both. He skipped in at once, his arm running up Hal's and taking him by surprise, so they ended in embrace, sword arms linked and blades entangled, bodies pressed together.

He grinned at Hal, baring his teeth, and saw the spark leap in his brother's eye. He was faster, though, and the first to jerk loose, leaving Hal for an instant off balance. He dropped by instinct into a perfect *Passata-sotto*, and his button pressed against Hal's throat.

"Touché," he said softly.

Hal's hands fell away, his rapier dangling, and he stood for a moment, chest heaving for breath, before he nodded.

"Je me rends," he said gruffly. I yield.

Grey took away his point and bowed to his brother, but his eyes were on Percy. Percy had left off his lunging altogether in order to watch, and stood against the wall, eyes wide in shock and what Grey hoped was admiration.

Signor Berculi had snatched off his wig and was kneading it with excitement.

"You!" he said, brandishing the object in Grey's face. "Never you do that! Is no proper that what you do! You insano! But good," he added, standing back a little and surveying Grey from head to toe as though he had never seen him before. He nodded, pursing his lips judiciously. "Very good."

Hal was rubbing his head and neck with a towel. He was flushed, but for a wonder, seemed amused rather than angry.

"What brought that on?" he asked.

"Showing off for the new brother," Grey replied flippantly, with a casual wave at Percy. He wiped a sleeve across his jaw. He was soaked; his shirt and breeches stuck to him, and his muscles jumped and quivered. "Want another go?"

Hal gave him a look.

"Oh, I think not," he said. "I've a meeting." He looked at Percy, and tossed the rapier to him. "Here, you have a go, Wainwright. I've taken the edge off him for you."

Percy's mouth fell open, and *Signor* Berculi burst into sardonic laughter. Percy turned the sword slowly round in his hands, not taking his eyes off Grey.

"Shall I?"

Grey's pulse was still hammering in his ears, and something exhilarating ran up his spine like champagne bubbles rising in a glass.

"Of course, if you like. You needn't worry," he said, and bowed deep to Percy, rapier politely extended. "I'll be gentle."



An hour later, Grey and Wainwright bade farewell to *Signor* Berculi and the *salle des armes*, and turned toward Neal's Yard, where one of Grey's favorite chophouses did a bloody steak with roast potatoes and the proprietor's special mushroom catsup—an appealing prospect to ravenous appetites.

Grey was entirely aware that more than one appetite had been stimulated by the recent exercise. The art of swordsmanship obliged one to pay the closest attention to the body of one's opponent, reading intent in the shift of weight, the narrowing of an eye, looking for a weakness that might be taken advantage of. He'd been attuned to every breath Percy Wainwright had taken for the last hour, and he knew damned well where Percy's weakness was—and his own.

Blood thrummed pleasantly through his veins, still hot from the exercise. The day was sunny, with a chilly breeze that dried the sweat and felt good on his heated skin, and the afternoon lay alluringly before them, empty of obligation. He was meant to be taking Percy on a tour of the barracks, the storerooms, the parade ground, and introducing him to such officers and men as they ran across in the course of it. *The devil with that*, he thought. *Time enough*.

"Did you really have a sword in your cradle?" Percy asked, with a sidelong smile.

"Of course not. No good having a sword if you haven't got any sense of balance," Grey said mildly. "I believe I had reached the advanced age of three years before my father trusted me to stay solidly on my feet."

He was gratified by the disbelieving look Percy gave him, but raised his hand in affirmation.

"Truly. If you ever become intimate with my—with *our* brother," he corrected with a smile, "ask him to show you the scar on his left leg. Hal was very kind in teaching little brother to use a sword, but carelessly gave me his own rapier to try. It wasn't buttoned, and I ran him through the calf with it. He bled buckets, and limped for a month."

Percy hooted with laughter, but quickly sobered.

"Is it terribly important, do you think? That I know how to use a sword, I mean. *Signor* Berculi seemed to think I lack any natural ability whatever, and I must say I'm forced to agree with him."

This was patently true, but Grey did not say so, merely moving a gloved hand in equivocation.

"It's always a good thing to be adept with weapons, especially if the fighting is close, but I know any number of officers who aren't. Much more important to act like an officer."

"How do you do that?" Percy seemed sincerely interested, which was the first step, and Grey told him so.

"Have a care for your men—but also for their purpose. They will look to you in battle, and in some cases, your strength of will may be the only thing enabling them to go on fighting. At that point, their physical welfare ceases to be a concern, either to them or to you. All that matters is to hold them together and see them through. They must trust you to do that."

Seeing the look of concern knitting Percy's dark brows, he altered his plan for the afternoon.

"After luncheon, we'll go to the parade ground, and I'll explain the general order of drills. That's why you have drills and discipline; the men must be in the habit of looking to you at all times, of following your orders without hesitation. And then," he said, rather diffidently, "perhaps we might take a little supper. Your rooms are convenient to the parade ground, I believe. If you did not mind ... we might fetch a bit of bread and cheese and eat there."

Percy's face lightened, the frown of concern replaced by a slow smile.

"I should like it of all things," he said. He coughed then, and took up another subject.

"What was Melton saying to you during your bout? About a conspiracy of sodomites?" There was a hint of incredulity in his voice. "A conspiracy to do *what*?"

"Oh ... create scandal, subvert the public morality, seduce children, bugger horses"—he smiled blandly into the face of an elderly gentleman passing, who had caught this and was staring at him, popeyed—"you know the sort of thing."

Percy made snorting noises and pulled him along by the arm.

"I do," he said, still snorting. "I grew up Methodist, remember."

"I didn't think Methodists even admitted the possibility of such things."

"Not out loud, certainly," Percy said dryly. "But why is your brother concerned with this particular affair?"

"Because—" he said, and got no further. A man jostled him rudely, shoving him into a wall so hard that he staggered.

"What the devil do you—" He put a hand to his bruised shoulder, indignant, then saw the look on the man's face and dodged. He hadn't seen the knife, but heard the scrape of it as it dragged across the brick wall where he had been standing an instant before.

The man was already recovering, turning. He kicked at the footpad, aiming for the knee, but got him square in the shin, hurting his own foot. The man yowled nonetheless, and drew back. Grey seized Percy by the sleeve.

"Run!"

Percy ran, Grey after him, and they pelted down the street, ducking hot-chestnut stands, orange sellers, and a throng of slow-moving women who shrieked and scattered as the men plowed through them. Footsteps rang on the pavement behind; he glanced back over his shoulder and saw *two* men, burly and determined, pursuing.

He'd left his rapier at the *salle des armes*, God damn it. He had his dagger, though, and ducking aside into an alley, ripped open his waistcoat and scrabbled frantically to get hold of it. He had no more than a second before the first of the men rushed in after him, reaching for him with a gap-toothed grin. Too late, the footpad saw the dagger and dodged aside; the point scored his abdomen, ripping his shirt and the flesh beneath. Grey glimpsed blood, and pressed the attack,

shouting and jabbing.

The man danced backward, looking alarmed, and shouted, "Jed!"

Jed arrived promptly, popping up behind his fellow with a blackthorn walking stick. He slammed this across Grey's forearm, numbing it, than bashed it at his hand. The dagger spun away into the piles of refuse. Grey didn't wait to look for it.

He dodged another blow, and ran down the alley, looking for egress or shelter and finding neither.

They were both after him. He'd no time to wonder where Percy was. The brick wall of a building loomed up in front of him. Dead end.

A door—there was a door, and he threw himself against it, but it didn't yield. He banged on it, kicked it, shouting for help. A hand grabbed his shoulder, and he swung round with it, striking out with a fist. The footpad grimaced, drew back, slapping at him like a baited bear.

Jed and his frigging stick were back, wheezing with the run.

"Do 'im," said the first footpad, falling back to make room, and Jed promptly seized the blackthorn in both hands and drove the head of it into Grey's ribs.

The next blow got him in the balls and the world went white. He dropped like a bag of tossed rubbish and curled up on himself, barely conscious of the wet cobbles under his face. He realized dimly that he was about to die, but was unable to do anything about it. Kicks and blows from the stick thudded into his flesh; he barely felt them through the fog of agony.

Then it stopped, and for a moment of blessed relief, he thought he'd died. He breathed, though, and discovered he hadn't, as pain shot through him, sudden and searing as the spark from a Leyden jar.

"It *is* you," said a gruff Scottish voice from somewhere above. "Thought so. Are ye hurt bad, then?"

He couldn't answer. Enormous hands grabbed him beneath the armpits and sat him up against the wall. He made a thin breathy noise, which was all he could manage in the way of a scream, and felt bile flood his throat.

"Oh, like that, is it?" said the voice, sounding resigned, as Grey bent to the side and vomited. "Aye, well, bide a wee, then. I'll fetch my jo wi' the chair."



The very young apothecary squinted earnestly at Grey's forearm and prodded it gingerly.

"Oh, bad, is it?" he said sympathetically, at the resulting hiss of breath.

"Well, it's not *good*," Grey said, ungritting his teeth with some effort. "But I doubt it's broken." He turned his wrist very slowly, tensed against the possible grating of bone ends, but everything moved as it should. It hurt, but it moved.

"Tellt ye it wasnae more than bruises." Rab MacNab shifted his bulk, uncrossing his arms and leaning forward from his post against the wall. "Agnes wouldnae have it but we get a doctor to ye, though. Tellt her 'twas a waste of money, aye?"

Despite his words, the big chairman cast a fond glance at his diminutive wife, who sniffed at him.

"I dinna mean to have his lordship die on my premises," she said briskly. "Bad for business, aye?" She nudged the apothecary aside, and bent to peer earnestly at Grey's face. Bright brown eyes scanned his battered features, then creased with her grin.

"Enjoy the ride, did ye?"

"I was much obliged to your husband, ma'am," he said. While he was naturally relieved to have been discovered and rescued by an acquaintance, being thrown into MacNab's sedan chair and carried at the trot for a mile had been very nearly as excruciating as the original injury.

"My congratulations on your new premises," he added, wishing to change the subject. He struggled upright and swung his legs off the divan, forcing the young apothecary—the boy couldn't be fifteen, surely—to let go of his arm.

"Thank ye kindly," Nessie said, looking gratified. He couldn't help but think of her as "Nessie," as he had first met her under this name, before her apotheocis from whore to madam—and wife. She patted the respectable white kerch that bound her mass of curly dark hair, and looked contentedly round the tiny salon. It was furnished with a few bits of ramshackle furniture, all showing signs of heavy use—but it was scrupulously clean, and a good wax candle burned in a solid brass chamber stick.

"Small it is, but a good place. Three girls, all clean and willing. Ye'll recommend us to your friends, I hope. Not but what we'd be pleased

to accommodate your friend here *gratis*," she added, turning graciously to Percy. "If ye'd care to pass the time, until his lordship's fettled? Janie will be free in no time."

Percy, who had been listening to the noises behind the wall—presumably involving Janie, as the gentleman with her was panting that name repeatedly—with patent interest, bowed to Nessie with grave decorum.

"I do appreciate the offer, ma'am. I'd not wish to tire Mistress Jane unduly, though. Surely she must have some rest."

"Och, no. Go all day and night, oor Janie will," MacNab assured him proudly, though he seemed relieved at Percy's further polite refusal.

"I'll be off, then. But shall I come again?" the chairman inquired, straightening up. "To carry his lordship home, once he's fit?"

"No, no," Grey said hastily. "I believe I am quite recovered. Mr. Wainwright and I will walk."

Percy's brows rose, and everyone in the room looked askance at Grey, causing him to think that the damage to his face must be worse than he'd thought.

"You really should be bled, my lord," the apothecary said earnestly. "Twould be dangerous to go out into the cold without, and you injured. A terrible strain upon your liver. You might take a chill. And the bruises on your face—a good leeching would do the world of good, my lord."

Grey hated being bled, and disliked leeches more.

"No, I am quite well, I assure you." He shoved himself to his feet and stood swaying, brilliant dots of light blinking on and off at the corners of his vision. A chorus of dismayed exclamations informed him that he was falling, and he put out his hands just in time to catch himself as he plumped back down on the divan.

Anxious hands grasped his shoulders and eased him down into a supine position. Cold sweat had come out on his forehead, and a gentle hand wiped it away with a cloth as his vision cleared.

To his surprise, the hand was Percy's, rather than Nessie's.

"You stay and be bled like a good boy," Percy said firmly. One corner of his mouth tucked back, repressing a smile. "I'll go and find a coach to take us home." He straightened up and bowed to Nessie and MacNab.

"I am so much obliged to you both for your kind assistance and hospitality. Do allow me to take care of this gentleman's fee." He nodded at the apothecary, his hand going to his purse.

"That's all right." Grey groped for his coat, which someone had folded tidily and put under his head. "I've got it."

"Ye do?" MacNab's heavy brows rose in surprise. "I made sure yon thugs would ha' made awa' wi' your purse."

"No, it's here." It was; so far as he could tell, everything was still in his pockets that should be.

"Errr ..." The apothecary had reddened, casting an agonized look at Nessie. "That's all right, gentlemen. I mean—my fee—that's—"

An ecstatic shriek burst through the wall beside Grey's ear.

"I promised him an hour wi' Susan," Nessie said, looking amused. "But if ye'd care to cover *her* fee, your lordship ..."

"With pleasure." He fumbled his purse open and extracted a handful of coins.

"Ahhh ..."

He looked at the apothecary, now a bright scarlet.

"Could I have Janie instead?" the boy blurted.

Grey sighed and added another florin to the coins in Nessie's hand.

It was only as he lay back and allowed the apothecary to fold back his sleeve that it occurred to him to wonder. He, too, had assumed the motive of the attack to be robbery. But it must have been plain to the footpads that he was incapable of resistance after that second blow. And yet they had not rifled his pockets and run—they'd beaten him until MacNab's timely appearance frightened them away.

Had they meant to murder him? That was a thought as cold as the fleam pressed into the bend of his elbow. He grimaced at the sting of the blade and shut his eyes.

No, he thought suddenly. *They had a knife*. The first attempt had been with a knife; there was no mistaking the grating of metal on brick. If they'd meant to murder him, they might have cut his throat without the slightest difficulty. And they hadn't.

There was a feeling of warmth as the blood welled and trickled over his arm; it felt almost soothing.

But if they had meant only to administer a beating ... why? He did not know them. If it was meant as warning ... of what?

Chapter 11



Warnings

What with one thing and another, it hadn't occurred to Grey to wonder what his mother's response to his misadventure might be. If it had, he might have expected her to peer at him in sympathy, pour him a stiff drink, and leave for a play. He would *not* have expected her to go white as a sheet. Not with fear for his well being—with anger.

"The *bastards*!" she said, in a tone barely above a whisper—a sign of great fury. "How dare they?"

"Rather easily, I'm afraid." Grey was sitting—gingerly—in her boudoir, examining himself in her enameled hand glass. The apothecary had been right about the leeching; while his jaw was sore, the swelling was much reduced, and only a faint blue tinge of new bruising showed, circling one eye and extending up into his temple. There was a cut on his cheek-bone, though, and a trickle of blood had run down his neck onto his neckcloth and the neckband of his shirt. There was also a sizable rent in his coat, to say nothing of the filth from rolling in the alley; Tom would be annoyed, too.

"Did you recognize them?" The countess's hands had been clenching a chair back. The first shock receding, she let go, though her fingers curled convulsively, wanting to strangle something. Hal got his temper from their mother.

"No," he said, laying down the looking glass. "Your ordinary ruffians. It's quite all right, Mother. They didn't even manage to rob me." He pulled the cuff of his coat down a bit, hiding his right hand, which, not having been leeched, looked much worse than his face.

Her lips pressed together, nostrils flaring. Motherlike, unable to attack the miscreants who had harmed her offspring, her annoyance was shifting itself to said offspring.

"Whatever were you doing in Seven Dials, John?"

He started to raise an eyebrow at her, but it hurt and he desisted.

"Hal and I took Percy Wainwright to the *salle des armes*. He and I were on our way to luncheon."

"Oh, Percy Wainwright was with you? Was he hurt?" Her fair brows drew together in concern.

"No."

"I swear I shall be relieved when you all are off to Germany," she said tartly. "I shall worry about you much less, if you're merely standing in front of cannon batteries and charging redoubts full of grenadiers."

He laughed at that, though carefully because of his ribs, and stood up, also carefully. Doing so, he felt a small hard object in his pocket, and was reminded.

"Father was a Freemason, was he not?"

"Yes," she said, and a fresh uneasiness seemed to flare in her eyes. "Why?"

"I only wondered—could this be his ring?" He fished it out and handed it to her. He might have picked it up carelessly in the library; there was a tray of the duke's small clutter, kept there by way of memoriam, though he did not recall ever seeing a ring among those objects.

He saw her eyes flick toward the little inlaid secretary that stood in the corner of the room, before she reached for the ring. Which told him that the duke had indeed had such a ring—and that she had kept it. So much for the dead past, he thought cynically.

She tried the ring gingerly on her left hand; it hung loose as a quoit on a stick, and she shook her head, dropping it back into his palm.

"No, it's much too big. Where did you get it? And why did you think it might be your father's?"

"No particular reason," he said with a shrug. "I can't remember where I picked it up."

"Let me see it again."

Puzzled, he handed it over, and watched as she turned it to and fro, bringing it to her candlestick in order to see the inside. At last, she shook her head and gave it back.

"No, I don't know. But ... John, if you do recall where you found it, will you tell me?"

"Of course," he said lightly. "Good night, Mother." He kissed her cheek and left her, wondering.

He declined Tom's suggestion of bread and milk in favor of a large whisky—or two—by the library fire, and had just reached a state of reconciliation with the universe when Brunton came to announce that he had a caller.

"I won't come in." Percy Wainwright smiled at him from the shadows of the porch. "I'm not fit to be indoors. I only came to bring you this."

"This" was Grey's dagger, which Percy put gingerly into his hands. Percy hadn't been exaggerating about his fitness for civil surroundings; he was wearing rough clothes, much spotted and stained, and he bore about his person a distinct odor of alleyways and refuse.

"I went back to look for it," he explained. "Luckily, it was under a pile of dead cabbages—sorry about the smell. I thought ... you might need it," he concluded, rather shyly.

Grey would have kissed him, damaged mouth notwithstanding, save for the lurking presence of Brunton in the hall. As it was, all he could do was to press Percy's hand, hard, in gratitude.

"Thank you. Will I see you tomorrow?"

Percy's smile glimmered in the dark.

"Oh, yes. Or shall I say, 'Yes, *sir*?' For I believe you're now my superior officer, aren't you?"

Grey laughed at that, bruises, bleeding, and his mother's odd behavior all seeming inconsequent for the moment.

"I suppose so. I'll arrange a commendation for you in the morning, then."

Chapter 12



Officers and Gentlemen

"We aren't like the Russians, you see," Quarry explained to Percy, kindly. "Bloody officers never go near their troops, let alone take them into battle."

"They don't?" Percy looked wary, as though thinking this might be a good idea. He had spent the week prior being taught the duties of an ensign and a second lieutenant, which consisted of attending parades, drills, roll calls, and mountings of the guard, keeping exact lists of accoutrements and stores—Captain Wilmot had complimented his penmanship, before excoriating him in round terms for misplacing a gross of boots and misdirecting ten barrels of powder—supervising the care of the sick in hospital—luckily there were relatively few of these at this season—and touring the soldiers' accommodation.

"Look out for factions," Quarry added. "We've two battalions—one fights abroad whilst the other reequips and brings up its strength—but we aren't as large as some, and many of our common soldiers are longtimers, who've learnt to rub along together. There'll be an influx of new men over the next month, though, and they tend to be sucked into one group or another. You can't afford that—you'll be watched, because of the family attachment, and there cannot be any sense of favoritism toward any group, save, of course, that you must always champion those companies directly under your command—you have four of them. Clear on that?"

"Oh, yes. Sir," Percy added hurriedly, making Quarry grin.

"Good lad. Now bugger off to Sergeant Keeble and learn which end of a musket the bullet goes in."

"Keeble's on the square with a company," Grey interrupted, having paused to deliver a sheaf of papers to Quarry's office. "I have a moment; I'll run him through the musket drill."

"Good. What's this lot?" Quarry picked up his spectacles and squinted through them at the papers. His eyes widened and he snatched off the spectacles, as though unable to believe his eyes. "What?" he bellowed.

Grey plucked at Percy's sleeve.

"You're dismissed," he whispered. "Come on."

Percy cast a last, apprehensive glance at Quarry, who had gone puce with rage and was addressing the sheaf of papers in loudly blasphemous terms. Quarry wasn't looking at him, but Percy saluted briskly and turned on his heel to follow Grey.

"What was that about, or am I allowed to know?" he asked, once outside.

"Nothing." Grey shrugged. "Instructions from the War Office, contradicting the last set. It happens once a week or so. How are you getting on with things?" More than busy with his own duties, he'd barely seen Percy during the week.

"Well enough. Or at least I hope so," Percy said dubiously. "People do shout at me a lot."

Grey laughed.

"Being shouted at is actually quite high on your list of duties," he assured Percy.

"No one shouts at you."

"I am," Grey said complacently, "a major. No one is allowed to shout at me—within the regiment, of course—save Harry, Colonel Symington, and my brother. I don't mind Harry, I keep the hell out of Symington's sight, and I tread with extreme care around Melton; I advise you to do the same. Have you toured the barracks this morning?"

"Yesterday. Ah ... is there anything I should look for especially, in terms of brewing trouble?"

Grey had gone with him for the first round of such tours, but now explained the finer points.

"For those in barracks, look for signs of drunkenness—which is not difficult to spot, I assure you—excessive gambling, or a disposition to excessive whoring. For those in billets in the town—"

"How do you know what's excessive?"

"If a man is missing important bits of his uniform or equipment, he's gambling excessively. If he's missing important bits of his anatomy from the syphilis, or if you find a whore actually in his bed, that's considered above the odds. Pox and the clap are more or less all right, provided he can stand up straight."

"Easier said than done. Ever had it?"

"No," Grey said, edging aside and giving Percy a stare. "Have you?"

"Once, in my younger years." Percy shuddered. "Only time I ever bedded a woman. If I hadn't already known what I was, that would likely have been enough to seal the matter."

"Was she a whore?" Grey inquired, not without sympathy. He had himself bedded several whores over the years, partly from necessity, and partly—at first—from a curiosity as to whether the experience might suddenly trigger some dormant desire for the female.

"No," Percy said. "In fact, she was a rather well-known lady with a marked reputation for piety. A good deal older than myself," he added delicately.

"Is she dead?" Grey asked, with interest. "Do I know her?"

"Yes, you do, and no, she isn't, worse luck, the old baggage. Anyway, what am I looking for when Colonel Quarry says, 'the looks of the men'?"

"Oh—" Grey waved a vague hand toward the distant parade ground, where a mass of new recruits were being chivvied into awkward lines by barking corporals. "If they seem thinner or paler than usual, not themselves."

"And how would I know that?" Percy protested. "I've only seen most of them once!"

"Well, you visit them every week—oftener, if you have reason to think there's trouble brewing," Grey said patiently. "You ought to know all their names by the end of the second week, and the names of their mothers, sisters, and sweethearts by the third."

"After which I will perhaps have mastered the duties of ensign, and be allowed to forget them all, as a second lieutenant?"

"You won't forget them," Grey said with confidence. "An officer never forgets his men. Never worry—I have the greatest faith in you."

"Well, I'm glad you think so," Percy said, in tones of extreme doubt, following Grey into the armory. "And these are muskets, are they?"



Despite Percy's protestations of ignorance and ineptitude, he proved to be a more than adequate shot. Grey had taken him out to the edge of London, to an open field, to try his hand without witnesses, and was agreeably surprised.

"And these are muskets, are they?" he mimicked, poking a finger through the center of a target, the cloth shredded by multiple shots.

Percy grinned, unabashed.

"I didn't say I'd never held a gun before."

"No, you didn't." Grey rolled up the target. "What kind of gun?"

"Target pistols, for the most part. Fowling pieces, now and again." Percy didn't go into detail, shrugging off Grey's praise with modesty. "What Colonel Quarry said—about the family connexion ..." He hesitated, not sure how to express his question.

"Well, there will be a bit of jealousy amongst the other officers," Grey said, matter-of-factly. "They all view each other as rivals, and of course will suspect you of preferment. Not a great deal you can do about it, though, save do your job well."

Percy rubbed a handkerchief over his face to remove the powder stains.

"I mean to," he said with determination. "What other skills ought I to possess, do you think?"

"Well," said Grey, with a glance at Wainwright's graceful form, "you must be able to dance. Can you dance?"

Percy looked at him in disbelief.

"Dance?"

Grey looked back in similar disbelief, but this wasn't mockery. He tended to forget, given Percy's ease in society, that he had not been born to that world but rather into a family of strict Methodists. He knew nothing of Methodists, but supposed they considered dancing sinful.

"Dance," Grey said firmly. "Dancing is most necessary for any man of good education, and the more so for an officer. And I quote from a well-known authority: 'Fencing endows a man with speed and strength, while dancing brings elegance and dignity to carriage and movement.'

"In that case, I am doomed."

"Well, dancing is somewhat less lethal in intent," Grey said, rubbing a finger beneath his nose in an effort not to laugh. "Come with me."

"Where are we going?" Percy gathered up the musket, cartridge box, shot pouch, powder horn, and other impedimenta of shooting.

"To my brother's house. My sister-in-law employs a very good dancing master for her sons, and I'm sure will make arrangements for you to be tutored discreetly."

Minnie was charmed by Percy, whom she had not yet met; still more charmed that he should seek her help. Grey had noticed this female paradox before: women who swooned at the notion of powerful men who would protect them at the same time liked nothing better than an open admission of helplessness on the part of any male within their sphere of influence.

He left Percy to Minnie, who was—in spite of her pregnancy—demonstrating steps and figures with considerable deftness, and went to the library.

Hal's collection of military historians, tacticians, and theorists was considerable, and Grey helped himself without compunction to those volumes he thought might be of most service in Percy's military instruction.

Flavius Vegetius Renatus—known chummily as "Vegetius" to his intimates—who wrote *Epitomae Rei Militaris* sometime between A.D. 385 and 450. One of Hal's favorites, a good place to start.

"Few men are brave; many become so through care and force of discipline," Grey murmured, tucking the book into the crook of his arm.

There was Mauvillon's *Histoire de la Dernière Guerre de Bohème,* in three volumes. Very popular, and quite recent, having been published only two years before, in Amsterdam. Only volumes I and II were present—Hal must be reading volume III—but he took the first one.

He hesitated among Marcus Aurelius, Tacitus, and Vauban, but on impulse added Virgil's *Aeneid*, for some relief. That would do for now; after all, Percy had very little time to read these days—no more than Grey himself did.

He turned from the bookshelf at the sound of a step, and found his brother had returned.

"Stealing my books again?" Hal asked, with a smile.

"Retrieving my own." Grey tapped the *Aeneid*, which was in fact his. "And borrowing Vegetius for Percy Wainwright, if you don't mind."

"Not in the least. Quarry says he's shaping well," Hal remarked. "I see—or rather, I hear—that Minnie's teaching him to dance." He inclined his head toward the drawing room, where the sound of laughter and the counting of steps indicated the satisfactory progress of the first lesson.

"Yes. I think he'll do very well," Grey said, pleased at hearing Harry's good opinion.

"Good. I'm sending him in command of a company down to Sussex tomorrow, to fetch back a shipment of powder."

Grey felt an immediate urge to protest, but stifled it. His opposition to the suggestion was based more on the fact that he and Percy had agreed to a private rendezvous next day than to any doubt of Percy's ability to manage such an expedition—or to his knowledge of the inherent dangers of any expedition involving kegs of black powder and inexperienced soldiers.

"Oh, good," he said casually.

He was beginning to feel, like Percy, that perhaps he was doomed. To involuntary celibacy, if nothing else.

"Where have you been?" he asked curiously, noticing as Hal put off his cloak that his brother was in traveling clothes, rather than uniform.

Hal looked mildly disconcerted, and Grey, with interest, saw him rapidly consider whether to tell the truth or not.

"Bath," he said, with only an instant's delay.

"Again? What the devil is in Bath?"

"None of your business."

Suddenly, and without warning, Grey lost his temper. He dropped the books on the desk with a bang.

"Don't tell me what is my business and what is not!"

If Hal was taken aback, it was for no more than an instant.

"Need I remind you that I am the head of this family?" he said, lowering his voice, with a glance at the door.

"And I am bloody *part* of this family. You can't fob me off by telling me things are none of my business. You cannot ship me off to Aberdeen to prevent my asking questions!"

Hal looked as though he would have liked to do precisely that, but he controlled himself, with a visible effort.

"That was not why you were sent to Aberdeen."

Grey pounced on that.

"Why, then?"

Hal glared at him.

"I decline to tell you."

Grey hadn't hit Hal for a number of years, and had lost the fight on the last occasion when he'd tried it. He gave Hal a look suggesting that he wouldn't lose this one. Hal returned the look and shifted his weight, indicating that he would welcome the chance of relieving his feelings by violence. That was interesting; Hal was more upset than he appeared.

Grey held his brother's gaze and ostentatiously unclenched his fist, laying his hand flat on the desk.

"I hesitate to insult your intelligence by pointing out the fact that I am a grown man," he said, politely.

"Good," Hal said, very dryly indeed. "Then I won't insult yours by

explaining that it is the fact that you are indeed a man that prevents my telling you anything further. Be on the square at ten o'clock tomorrow."

He left the room without looking round, though there was a certain tenseness about his shoulders that suggested he thought Grey might conceivably throw something at him.

Had there been anything suitable within reach, he likely would have. As it was, Grey was left with the blood thundering in his ears and both fists clenched.



A flurry of mutually contradictory instructions from three Whitehall offices, an outbreak of fever in the barracks, and the sudden sinking—in harbor—of one of the transport ships meant to carry them to Germany kept Grey too busy for the next week to worry about what might be happening in Sussex, or to pay more than cursory attention to the news that the sodomite conspirators had been condemned to death.

He was sitting in his own small office at the end of the day, staring at the wall, and trying to decide whether it was worth the trouble to put on his coat and walk to the Beefsteak for supper or whether he might simply send the door guard to bring him a Cornish pasty from the street, when the door guard himself appeared, come to ask if he would receive a visitor—a Mrs. Tomlinson.

Well, that resolved his immediate dilemma. He would have to put on his coat to receive this woman, whoever she was.

A soldier's wife, perhaps, come to beg him to get her husband out of some difficulty or to advance her his pay. Tomlinson, Tomlinson ... he was running mentally through his roster, but failing to recall any Tomlinsons. Still, there were always new recruits—oh, no. Now he remembered; this Tomlinson woman was Minnie's acquaintance, the mistress of the Captain Bates who had just been condemned to death. He said something which caused the door guard to blink.

"Bring her up," he said, settling his lapels and brushing crumbs from his luncheon pasty off his shirt ruffle.

Mrs. Tomlinson reminded Grey—not unpleasantly—of his favorite horse. Like Karolus, she had a strong jaw, a kind eye, and a pale mane, which she wore in a bundle of tight plaits, as though on

parade. She dropped into a low curtsy before him, spreading her skirts as if he were the king. He took her hand to raise her, and kissed it, taking advantage of the gesture to think uncharitable thoughts about his sister-in-law.

No hint of these thoughts showed in his voice, though, as he begged her to be seated and sent Tom for wine and biscuits.

"Ah, no, sir," she said hurriedly. "I'll not stay. I've come only to thank your lordship for discovering Captain Bates's whereabouts for me—and to beg a further favor of your lordship." A becoming color rose in her cheeks, but she held his gaze, her own pale hazel eyes clear and direct. "I hesitate to impose upon you, my lord. Will you believe me that only the most urgent necessity impels me?"

"Of course," he said, as cordially as possible under the circumstances. "What may I have the pleasure of doing for you, madam?"

"Will you go and see him?"

He stared at her, uncomprehending.

"Captain Bates," she said. "Will you go and see him?"

"What," he said stupidly, "in Newgate?"

The faintest of smiles lifted her long, solid jaw.

"I'm sure he would wait upon your honor here, and he was able," she said, very respectful. "I'm sure he would prefer it." She had the faintest trace of an Irish accent; rather charming.

"I'm sure he would," Grey said dryly, recovered from the surprise. "Why ought I to go and see him? Beyond, of course, the simple fact of your request."

"I think he must tell you that himself, sir."

He rubbed his own jaw, considering.

"Do you ... wish me to carry a message for you?" he hazarded. The kind eyes widened.

"Ah, no, my lord. No need; I see him every day."

"You do?" It wasn't impossible; even the most depraved felons received visitors. But ... "Does your husband not object?" Grey said, as delicately as possible.

She neither blushed nor looked away.

"I haven't asked him, my lord."

He thought of inquiring exactly where her husband was, but decided that it was no business of his.

Hal would doubtless advise against it, but Grey's own curiosity was strong. It was likely the only opportunity he might get to hear any unfiltered details regarding the affair. Between the highly colored public version of events in the newspapers and Hal's coldly cynical view was a substantial gap; he would like very much to know where the truth lay—or, if not the truth, another view of matters.

What the devil could Bates want with him, though? He hesitated for a moment longer, fixed by those large hazel eyes, but at last capitulated. No harm to hear what Bates had to say.

"Yes, all right. When?"

"Tomorrow, my lord, if you can. The time is short, you see. The ha—the execution is set for Wednesday noon." Only with the word "hanging" did her composure desert her momentarily. She paled a little and her hand went unthinking to her throat, though she snatched it away again at once.

"Very well," he said slowly. "May I—" But she had seized his hand and, falling to one knee, kissed it passionately.

"Thank you," she said, and with a hard squeeze of the hand, was gone in a flurry of petticoats.

Chapter 13



A Visit to Newgate

Entering a prison is never a pleasant experience, even if such entrance be accomplished voluntarily, rather than under duress. Grey had been governor of Ardsmuir Prison for more than a year, and he had never entered the place—even his own quarters—without a deep breath and a stiffening of the spine. Neither had he enjoyed visiting the Fleet in search of recruits who would accept army service to escape debt, nor any of the smaller prisons and gaols from which it had been his occasional duty to abstract errant soldiers. Still, Newgate was notable, even for a connoisseur like himself, and he passed under the portcullis at the main gate with a sense of foreboding.

Henry Fielding had described it in one of his recent novels as "a prototype of hell," and Grey was inclined to think this description admirably succinct.

The room to which he was shown was bleak, nothing but a deal table, two chairs, and an empty hearth, surrounded by walls of discolored stone that bore many laboriously chiseled names, and a number of disquieting scratches, suggesting that more than one desperate wretch had attempted to claw his—or her—way out. Outside the room, though, the prison teemed like a butcher's offal pile, rich with maggots.

He'd brought a vial of spirits of turpentine, and applied this periodically to his handkerchief. It numbed his sense of smell, which was a blessing, and might perhaps keep pestilence away. It did nothing for the noises—a cacophony of wailing, cursing, manic laughter and singing second only to Bedlam—nor for the sights.

Through the barred window, he could see across a narrow courtyard to a large opening that apparently provided light and air to an underground cell, and was likewise barred. A woman stood upon the inside sill of this opening, clinging precariously to the bars with one hand, the other being used to lift her ragged petticoats above her waist.

Her privates were pressed through the opening between the bars, for the convenience of a guard who clung, beetlelike, to the outside of the bars. His jacket hung down far enough as to obscure his straining buttocks, but the droop of his breeches and the rhythmic movements of his hips were plain enough.

Prisoners passing through the courtyard ignored this, walking by with downcast eyes. Several guards also ignored it, though one man stopped and said something, evidently an inquiry, for the woman turned her head and made lewd kissing motions toward him, then let go her skirts in order to extend a hand through the bars, fingers curling in enticement—or perhaps demand.

The sound of the door opening behind him tore Grey's fascinated gaze from this tableau.

Bates was decently dressed in a clean uniform, but heavily shackled. He shuffled across the room and collapsed into one of the chairs, not waiting for introduction or invitation.

"Thank God," he said, sighing deeply. "Haven't sat in a proper chair in weeks. My back's been giving me the very devil." He stretched, groaning luxuriously, then settled back and looked at Grey.

His eyes were a quick, light blue, and he was shaved to perfection. Grey looked him over slowly, noting the pristine linen, neatly tied wig, and manicured nails.

"I didn't know one could procure the services of a valet in here," Grey said, for lack of a better introduction.

Bates shrugged.

"It's like anywhere else, I imagine; you can get almost anything—provided you can pay for it."

"And you can." It wasn't quite a question, and Bates's mouth turned up a little. He had a heavy, handsome face, and a body to match; evidently he wasn't starved in prison.

"Haven't a great deal else to spend my money on, have I? And you can't take it with you—or so that very tedious minister tells me. Did you know they force you not merely to go to church on a Sunday here but to sit beside your coffin at the front?"

"I'd heard that, yes. Meant to encourage repentance, is it?" He could not imagine anyone less repentant in outward appearance than the captain.

"Can't say what it's *meant* to do," the captain said judiciously. "Bloody bore, I call it, and a pain in the arse—literally, as well as metaphorically. No proper pews; just filthy benches with no backs." He pressed his shoulders against his chair, as though determined to extract as much enjoyment from his present circumstances as possible.

Grey took the other chair.

"You are otherwise well treated?" Not waiting for an answer, Grey withdrew the flask of brandy he had brought, unstoppered it, and passed it across.

Bates snorted, accepting it.

"The buggers here who think I'm a sodomite are bad enough; the buggers who *are* sodomites are a damn sight worse." He gave a short laugh, took a healthy swallow of brandy, and breathed slow and deep for a moment. "Oh, God. Will you send me more of this for the hanging? They'll give you brandy here, if you pay for it, but it's swill. Rather die sober."

"I'll see what can be done," Grey said. "What do you mean, the sodomites are worse?"

Bates's eyes roamed over him, sardonic.

"The sodomites ... They had me chummed for a bit with a decorator from Brighton, name of Keyes. Woke me in the middle of the night, jabbing his yard at my fundament like a goddamned woodpecker. Offered to smash his teeth in, he didn't leave off *that* business, whereupon he has a go at *my* privates, slobbering like a dog!" Bates looked both affronted and mildly amused, and Grey began to be convinced that Minnie's opinion was correct.

"I take your point," Grey said dryly. "You are not yourself a sodomite."

"That's right," said Bates, leaning back in his chair. "Just your basic traitor. But that's not what I'll be hanged for." For the first time, a tinge of bitterness entered his tone.

Grey inclined his head. Evidently Bates took it for granted that Grey knew the truth of the matter. How? he wondered, but his mind automatically supplied the answer—Minnie, of course, and her sympathetic acquaintance with Mrs. Tomlinson. So Hal *did* talk to her.

"Yet you've chosen not to make that public," Grey observed. "There are any number of journalists who would listen." He'd been obliged to fight his way through a crowd of them outside the main gate, all hoping for the opportunity to get a private interview with one or more of the infamous conspirators.

"They'd listen if I told them what they want to hear," the captain observed caustically. "The public has made up its mind, d'ye see. And there are too many voices from Whitehall whispering in Fleet Street's ear these days; mine wouldn't be heard past the door of this place. I'm a convicted sodomite conspirator, after all—obviously, I'd say anything."

Grey let this pass; he was likely right.

"You sent for me," he said.

"I did, and I thank you for coming." Bates raised the flask ceremoniously to him, and drank, then leaned his head back, studying Grey with interest.

"Why?" Grey said after a moment.

"You're an officer and a gentleman, aren't you? Whatever else you may be."

"What do you mean by that?" Grey kept his voice calm, though his heart leapt convulsively.

Bates looked at him for a long moment, a half smile on his face.

"One would never guess, to look at you," he said conversationally.

"I'm afraid I don't take your meaning, sir," Grey said politely.

"Yes, you do." Bates waved a hand, dismissing it, and took another drink from the flask. "Not to worry. I wouldn't say a word—and if I did, no one would believe me." He spoke without rancor. "You know a man named Richard Caswell, I imagine. So do I."

"In what capacity, may I ask?" Grey inquired, out of personal curiosity as much as duty. Caswell was the proprietor of Lavender House, an exclusive club for gentlemen who preferred gentlemen—but he undoubtedly had other irons in the fire. And if the suborning of treason was one of those ...

"Moneylender," Bates said frankly. "I gamble, d'ye see. That's what's brought me to this pass; need of money. My old granny said as the cards were the devil's pasteboards, and they'd lead me straight to hell. I wonder if I shall get to see her and tell her she was right? Though if so, I suppose she'll be in hell, too, won't she? Serve her right, the prating old bizzom."

Grey declined the offered distraction.

"And Richard Caswell mentioned my name to you? In what connexion, may I ask?" He was more than surprised to hear that Caswell had spoken of him, and in fact, doubted it. Dickie Caswell would have died a long time ago were he that careless with the secrets he held.

Bates gave him a long, shrewd look, then shook his head and laughed.

"Play cards, do you, Major?"

"Not often."

"You should. I see you aren't easily bluffed." He shifted his feet, the irons clanking.

"No, Caswell didn't mention your name. He had one of those beastly coughing fits of his and was obliged to rush into his chamber for his medicine. I took the opportunity to rummage his desk. His diary was all in code, the wily beast, but he'd written *Lord John Grey* on the margin of his blotter. Didn't know who you were, but happened by chance to be at cards with Melton that night, and he spoke of his brother John. Susannah knew your brother's wife, had heard the story of your title, and ... *voilà*." He smiled at Grey, all good-fellowship.

Grey felt the fist in his midsection relax by degrees. It clenched again at the captain's next words.

"And then of course, Mr. Bowles's assistant mentioned you in my hearing, sometime later."

The word "Bowles" went through him like an electric shock. Followed by a slightly lesser one at the word "assistant."

"Neil Stapleton?" he asked, surprised at the calmness of his own voice.

"Don't know his name. Fairish chap, pretty face like a girl's, sulky-looking?"

Grey managed to nod.

"You were with Mr. Bowles at the time?" he asked. Dickie Caswell dealt in secrets. Hubert Bowles dealt in lives. Presumably on behalf of the government.

"That would be telling, wouldn't it?" Bates put back his head and drained the last of the brandy. "God, that's good!"

"I know nothing of the particulars against you," Grey said carefully. "The material you passed to Melchior Ffoulkes—this came from Mr. Bowles?" And if so, what sort of game was Bowles playing?

Bates stifled a belch with his fist, and gave him an eye.

"I may be a cardsharp, a traitor, and a scoundrel in general, Grey. Doesn't mean I've no sense of honor, you know. I won't betray any of my associates. Believe me, it's been tried. No one swings on my word."

He turned the empty flask over. A single drop fell onto the table, its warm pungency a welcome relief from the cold scent of turpentine. Bates put his finger in it, and licked it thoughtfully.

"What is it they say—'Live by the sword, die by the sword'? I imagine you know that one, don't you?"

"I know that one, yes." Grey's mind was working like a Welsh miner at the coal face, great black chunks of supposition mounting in a dirty pile round his feet. He essayed one or two further questions regarding Bowles and Stapleton, but was met with shrugs. Bates had given him Bowles's name, but would go no further. Had that been his only purpose? Grey wondered.

"You did send for me," he pointed out. "Presumably there is something you wish to tell me."

"No. To ask you. A favor. Or rather, two." The captain looked him over, seriously, as though evaluating a questionable hand that might still be played to advantage.

"Ask me what?"

"Susannah," the captain said abruptly.

"Mrs. Tomlinson?"

"The same, and bad cess to the mister, as Susie's fond of saying." A brief smile flickered, then disappeared. "She was wed to him young, and he's a right bastard."

"My sister-in-law says he's a bore."

"He is, but the two aren't exclusive. He beats her—or he did, before she took up with me. I put the fear of God into him—wish I'd killed the sniveling little shit when I'd the chance...." Bates brooded for a moment on lost opportunities, but then shook off his regrets.

"Well, plainly once I'm gone, she'll be at his mercy again—if he's not already at it."

"And you wish me to step into your place and threaten Mr. Tomlinson with bodily harm if he mistreats his wife? I should be pleased to do that, but I fear—"

"No, I want you to get her away from him," Bates interrupted. "She's a brother in Ireland, in Kilkenny. If she can reach him, he can protect her. But she's no money of her own, and I'm in no position to give her any."

Grey looked at him sharply.

"A nice choice of words," he observed. "Rather than saying that you haven't any, either."

Bates returned his stare.

"Let us merely say that if I had funds available, I should turn them over to you on the spot, to use in her behalf, and leave it at that, shall we?"

Grey gave a brief nod of assent, chucking that into the pile at his feet for later analysis.

"And the second favor that you mentioned?"

"Ah. Well, I suppose that's Susannah, as well—in a way of speaking.

She insists she'll come to the hanging."

For the first time, the captain appeared to experience some perturbation at the thought of his demise.

"I don't want her there, Grey," he said. "You know what it'll be like."

"Yes, I do," Grey said quietly. "No, you don't want her there. Do you wish me to see her? Explain, as gently as I can—"

"I've explained, and not gently," Bates interrupted. He grimaced. "That only made her more insistent. She says that she can't stand the thought of me dying alone in a crowd of people convinced that I'm a disgusting pervert. She says—" His voice thickened momentarily, and he paused to cough heavily into his handkerchief, in order to cover the lapse. "She says," he continued more firmly, "that she wants someone to be there who knows why I'm really dying, and what I really am. Someone for me to look at from the gallows, and know." He looked at Grey, a faint smile on his lips.

"I don't know what you are, Grey, and I don't care. But you do know what I am, and the truth of why I'm dying here. You'll do."

Grey felt as though someone had suddenly snatched the chair out from under him.

"You want me to attend your hanging?"

His tone must have contained some of the incredulity he felt, for the captain gave him an impatient look.

"I'd have sent an engraved invitation, had I time," he said.

Grey wished he'd brought an extra flask for himself. He rubbed a knuckle slowly down the bridge of his nose.

"And you expect that I will accede to these—you will pardon my characterizing them as peculiar, I trust—requests ... why?"

Bates smiled crookedly.

"Let's put it this way. You swear to see Susie safe to her brother in Ireland, and to see me safe to wherever I'm going—and I undertake to see to it that Hubert Bowles never sees your name in my handwriting."

Grey blinked.

"Saying what?"

Bates raised one fair brow.

"Does it matter?"

It took the space of one breath for Grey to come to a conclusion regarding the possibilities.

"No, it doesn't. Done." He paused for an instant. "You trust my

word?"

"Officer and gentleman," Bates repeated, with a tinge of ruefulness. "Besides, I haven't a great deal of choice in the matter, do I?"

There seemed no more to say after that. He nodded, considered offering his hand to Bates in farewell, and thought better of it. Then something else occurred to him.

"One last question, Captain—if you will allow me?"

Bates made an expansive gesture.

"I've all the time in the world, Major. Until Wednesday, that is."

"I respect your determination to safeguard the names of any associates still at large. But perhaps you will tell me this: are any of them Jacobites?"

The blank surprise on Bates's face was so patent that it would have been laughable under other circumstances.

"Jacobites?" he said. "God, no. Why would you think that?"

"The French are involved," Grey pointed out. Bates shrugged.

"Well, yes. But it isn't always religion with the frogs, no matter what old Louis tells the Pope, and the Stuart cause is deader than I'll be on Wednesday. Louis's a merchant at heart, and not about to throw good money after bad. Besides, he never wanted James Stuart on the English throne, and never expected him to take it—just wanted the distraction, while he got on with quietly pocketing Brussels."

"You know a great deal about what King Louis wants."

Bates nodded, slowly.

"And you know what I want, Major. We have our bargain. But if Mr. Bowles should be moved to seek one of his own ..." He quirked a brow, and Grey saw a nerve twitch in his jaw. "He's got four days left." But it was said without hope.

Grey bowed and put on his hat.

"I'll see you on Wednesday."

He had nearly reached the door, when he stopped and turned for a moment.

"I'll send the brandy Tuesday night."



Percy Wainwright was expected to return from his journey on Wednesday. Grey thought of sending him a note, of asking for his company, but didn't. He did know what it would be like.

Chapter 14



Place of Execution

Grey had always thought the roar of a mob to be one of the worst sounds possible. Worse than the howl of a hurricane or the clap of thunder that follows in the wake of nearby lightning. And the mob itself every bit as random and as lethal as other forces of nature. The only difference, Grey thought, was that you would not call a mob an act of God.

He spread his feet a little, to keep his footing against the waves of people who were lapping up the slopes of Tyburn Hill, and kept one hand on his sword hilt, the other on his dagger. He'd considered for some time whether to wear his uniform or not, but at last had decided that he must. Soldiers were not universally popular, by any means, and it was not unknown for a maddened crowd to turn on them. But if the point of his presence was to give some reassurance to Michael Bates, then he must be recognizable. To which end, he'd worn uniform, chosen a spot as near to the gallows as he could get, and held it grimly against all comers.

He hoped the brandy had arrived in time, but there was no way to tell. He'd gone direct to Tyburn, rather than follow the cart from Newgate as many spectators did. By the time it rumbled into view, the three prisoners in it were so plastered with mud and filth that they might have been bears, bound for a baiting.

And a baiting it was.

The noise rose, hungry, at sight of the prisoners, and a hail of rocks and debris arched out of the crowd—most of it falling back onto said crowd, distance preventing the missiles from reaching their targets. Cries of pain or protest were swallowed by the immense thrum, menacing as the sound of a hornet's nest.

He felt it in his bones, and along with it, an echo of the terror that must afflict those who were its focus.

The minister who walked behind the condemned cart was heavily splashed with mud himself, though his grim face was still visible through the smears. A final bombardment of rocks drove him back, clutching his Bible to his chest as though it might be a literal as well as spiritual shield.

"Crush the mon-sters! Crush the mon-sters!" The chant was coming from a group of gaily clad prostitutes, who had linked arms against the surge of the crowd and were throwing their bodies to and fro in unison, in rhythm to their chant. A rival group was brandishing ill-spelt placards denouncing *Efemnit CUNTS!* He recognized Madame Mags, resplendent in black taffeta and gold brocade, and a number of her girls. Luckily, they were all much too busy enjoying themselves to notice him.

Other chants, of much more offensive content, poked rudely through the noise of the mob. Most of the rocks, he saw, were being flung by women—not prostitutes: housewives, barmaids, servant girls, with faces made ugly by hate under their respectable caps.

The prisoners were being helped down from the cart, a few of the sheriff's men pushing back the crowd with sticks and halberds. The men scuttled for the steps, as though the gallows was a place of sanctuary. Doubtless it was.

Now he could make out Bates, a stocky figure in the center, shoulders back, head up. The colors of the Horse Guards uniform were just visible beneath the coating of filth.

The slender youth on the right also wore uniform; that must be Otway, and the small, hunched man in ordinary clothes no doubt Jeffords. A rock struck Bates in the chest and he staggered back a step, but then caught himself and stepped firmly forward, teeth bared at the crowd in what might have been a grin or a snarl. The response was a fresh shower of dung and shouted vitriol. Some criminals came to their end at Tyburn in glory, accompanied by fiddlers and flowers; not sodomites.

Grey shoved between two 'prentices who tried to squeeze in front of him, and elbowed one of them in the side hard enough that the youth squealed and pulled away, cursing. He could see Bates's gaze roaming over the crowd, and against his better judgment, waved his arms, shouting, "Bates!"

By a miracle, the man heard him. He saw the sharp eyes fix on him, and something like a smile beneath the mud and scratches.

He felt a stealthy hand at his pocket and grabbed at it, but it was a small hand, and the would-be pickpocket—a child of seven or eight—wriggled free of his grasp and dived into the crowd. He was barely in time to keep the child's accomplice from making away with his dagger while he was thus distracted, and by the time he was able to place his attention on the gallows once again, the executioner was

moving the men into place beneath the dangling nooses.

Otway screamed, a high, thin sound barely audible over the crowd. Nonetheless, the crowd caught it and took it up, wailing melodramatically and catcalling, as Otway struggled and kicked in terror, wild-eyed as a spooked pony.

Grey found his fists clenched hard on the hilts of sword and dagger. For God's sake! he thought, in agonized impatience, can you not die like a man, at least?

Thin white bags were placed over the prisoners' heads, the nooses adjusted; the minister walked slowly behind the men, reading aloud from his Bible, his words inaudible. Everything seemed to move with the horrid slowness of nightmare, and Grey suffered from the sudden illusion of having forgotten how to breathe.

Then the traps were sprung and the bodies fell, ending with a hideous jerk. Cheers and screams rose from the crowd. Otway hung limp, his neck broken clean. The other two were dancing, knees churning the air for purchase.

Grey looked wildly for the neck-breakers, the men who would—for a price—seize the legs of a half-hanged man and pull to hasten his death. He had paid for someone to perform this office for Bates, should it be necessary. But no one ran forward, and he saw the Newgate guards watching contemptuously, spitting, as Bates twirled and jerked upon his rope.

He didn't think. He battered his way through the people before him. The guards, surprised, saw his uniform and let him pass.

One of Bates's flailing feet struck him in the ear, the other in the chest. He jumped, clasped the frenzied, muscular thighs with his arms, and clung like death, his weight pulling him down toward the earth. The parting of Bates's neckbones vibrated through him like the twang of a stretched rope, and he tumbled into the mud below the gallows.

Chapter 15



A Delicate Errand

At his mother's door, he bade farewell and thanks to Captains MacNeill and MacLachlan, two officers of the Scotch Greys who had rescued him from the mob at Tyburn.

"No but what I'm sure 'twas kindly meant," MacNeill said to him, for perhaps the fourth time. "But to risk your life to send a pederast to hell a moment faster, man? Havers!"

MacLachlan, a dour man of few words, shook his head in agreement.

"Still, I should like to get a good grup o' yin or twa o' the rascals," MacNeill went on with gloomy relish. "I'd teach them to ken what they're aboot!"

Grey was not sure which rascals MacNeill meant—whether pederasts, or the yahoos in the crowd who had tried to drown him in a puddle. It didn't seem worth inquiring. He tried to press a bit of money upon them to drink his health, but was starchily informed that both were Presbyterians and abstainers, whereupon he thanked them once again and limped inside.

His cousin Olivia, massively pregnant, was edging down the stairs. She stopped when she saw him, and put a hand to her mouth, eyes wide with horror.

"John! What's happened to you?"

He opened his mouth to explain, and thought better of it.

"I, er ... I was run down by a coach in the street." He pressed against the wall to let her past, realizing too late that he was leaving filthy smudges on the wallpaper. Olivia peered at him with concern, then called to the butler.

"Brunton, go and fetch a doctor!"

"No, no! I'm fine, quite all right. I'll ... I'll just ... have a bath and go to bed." He was about to escape past her and up the stairs, when the door to the drawing room opened and Percy Wainwright came out.

His brows shot up at sight of Grey, but he said nothing, merely turned on his heel, went back into the drawing room, and reappeared almost at once with a glass of wine, which he thrust into Grey's hand. "I'd come to talk with you and Melton about the regiment," Percy said, eyeing him with a concern equal to Olivia's. "But I shall come again another day."

Grey shook his head, mouth full of wine, and swallowed.

"No, stay," he said hoarsely. "Hal's coming?"

The front door opened and his brother came in, stopping dead at sight of Grey.

"Yes, I know," Grey said wearily. "Go talk to Wainwright, will you? I'll be down in a moment."

Hal ignored this, and came close, frowning at him.

"What the devil happened to you?"

"He was run down in the street by a coach!" Olivia leapt in, indignant on her cousin's behalf. "Did they not even stop to see if you were all right, Johnny?"

"You were run down by a coach?" The countess, drawn by the hubbub, appeared at the top of the stairs, looking alarmed. "John! Are you all right?"

Grey rubbed his brow. A fine reward for his good intentions, he thought bitterly.

"I'm quite all right," he said, speaking carefully, because his lower lip was split and his jaw swollen. The teeth on the left felt loose, but would probably be all right. "No, they didn't stop. I doubt the driver saw me. It was a mail coach," he added, in a moment of inspiration, and saw the lines between his mother's brows relax a bit, though she went on looking worried.

She was by this time at the foot of the stair, examining him in detail, and while he was touched by her solicitude, he really wanted nothing more than a stiff drink and a bath, and said so.

"Yes, a bath," the countess agreed, wrinkling her nose. "And burn those clothes!"

This sentiment was put to a popular vote and unanimously passed. Meanwhile, Brunton, who had actually been paying attention, quietly manifested himself beside Grey, removed the glass of wine from his hand and replaced it with a glass containing Scotch whisky, a liquid whose restorative qualities Grey had learnt to appreciate while at Ardsmuir. He leaned against the wall—what were a few more smudges, after all?—and inhaled a mouthful, closing his eyes in thanks.

Meanwhile, attention had shifted to Hal, who was explaining that he was not stopping, as he was summoned to a meeting at Whitehall, but had merely paused on his way there in order to deliver Percy Wainwright's commission papers, now officially countersigned and sealed with the Royal seal. These he produced with a flourish and handed over to general applause.

Percy flushed up like a peony, to Grey's amusement, and bowed to the company, papers held to his chest.

"I thank you, my lord," he said to Hal. "And I'm sure I will hope to be a credit to you and to the regiment."

"Oh, you will be," Hal said, smiling. "If it kills you."

There was laughter at Percy's faint look of alarm, and his concern faded into an answering smile.

"You think I'm joking, don't you?" Hal said, still smiling. "Ask my brother. In the meantime—congratulations, sir, and welcome to our company!" He bowed briskly, and with a wave of farewell, strode out to his waiting coach.

"You'll track mud everywhere, John," the countess said, returning her disapproving attention to Grey's state. "Do step into the drawing room and take your clothes off; I'll send Tom down to take care of you."

"I'll keep you company." Percy, tucking his commission papers away in his coat, opened the door for Grey, who limped through, clutching his whisky. What with one thing and another, lust was the last thing on his mind at the moment, but he was nonetheless glad to be alone with Percy, if only for a short time.

"You know," Percy said, closing the door and eyeing him. "I begin to be convinced that you do this on purpose, to avoid my company."

Grey leaned against the mantelpiece with a faint groan, unable to sit down on any of the furniture.

"Believe me," he said, "I should prefer the company of an organgrinder's monkey, let alone yours, to that of the persons I was obliged to consort with this afternoon."

"Were you really run down by a coach?" Wainwright asked, peering curiously at him.

"Why do you ask?" Grey parried.

"Because I've seen people run down by coaches," Percy replied bluntly. "If you'd been only knocked aside and rolled in the gutter, you'd be bruised and filthy—but you look as though you've been beaten within an inch of your life. If you'll pardon my frankness." He smiled, to indicate that no offense was meant by this, before going on.

"And if you'd actually been run over by a mail coach, you'd be

dead, or close to it. You'd certainly have broken bones. To say nothing of wheel marks on your clothes."

Grey laughed, despite himself. There was no need to shelter Percy from the truth, after all—and it was dawning on him that, in fact, there were aspects of the situation that he could share with Percy Wainwright that he couldn't tell even his brother.

"You're right," he said, and proceeded to give Percy an abbreviated, but truthful, version of his afternoon's activities. Percy listened with the greatest attention and sympathy, refilling Grey's glass when it got low.

"So you were beaten by a mob who objected to your going to the help of a gentleman whom they thought a sodomite—who in fact wasn't," Wainwright observed, at the end of it. "Rather ironic, isn't it?"

"Bates was a brave man, and he died very horribly," Grey said shortly. "I am not inclined to find humor in the situation."

Wainwright's expression sobered at once.

"You are right; I do apologize. I meant no offense, either to you or to Captain Bates."

"No, of course not." Grey softened his tone. "And in all justice, the captain himself would doubtless have appreciated the irony. He was that sort of man."

"You liked him," Wainwright observed, with no hint of surprise.

"I did." Grey hesitated. He did not yet know Wainwright very well, for all he was about to become a member of the family. And yet ... "Have you ever been to Ireland?" he asked abruptly.

Wainwright blinked, surprised.

"Once. Several years ago."

Grey considered for an instant longer—but the man could always say no, after all.

"The captain entrusted me with a particular errand, of importance and delicacy. I have promised to see it done, but—well, let me tell you."

By the time he had finished his explanation, Wainwright's mobile face was a study: shock, sympathy, curiosity, and—no doubt about it—a desire to laugh.

"You have the greatest talent for awkward situations," he said, the corner of his mouth twitching. "Have you any idea why the captain should have selected *you* for this particular enterprise?"

Grey hesitated again, but answered honestly.

"Yes, I do. He thought I could be blackmailed."

All humor vanished from Wainwright's face. He lowered his voice, though they were quite alone.

"Has he blackmailed you? You are in danger of exposure if you do not perform his errand?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Grey said hurriedly. "He did not know—that is—no." Nothing would induce him to utter the name of Hubert Bowles, even if it were possible to explain how he had come to know the man, which it wasn't.

"It was nothing to do with ... that," he said. "Another matter, which I am not at liberty to explain. But the end of it is that I did agree to perform the captain's request. I did like him," he added, half-apologizing. "And yet I cannot leave London at present; I have duties to the regiment, and for me to ask leave would cause a great deal of attention and comment. I must find someone suitably discreet to accompany Mrs. Tomlinson to Ireland—and do so quickly, before her husband discovers the plan or has a chance to injure her further."

Wainwright rubbed a thoughtful finger below his lip, and glanced at Grey.

"Would you trust me to do it? I am commissioned, but my service does not become effective with the regiment for ten days yet; I presume you could give me leave?" He smiled, eyes dancing. "And I can assure you of my discretion."

Grey's heart lightened at once, though he protested.

"I cannot ask such a thing of you. The danger—"

"Oh, I don't see how you can expect me to resist such an opportunity." Percy's smile grew wider. "After all, if there is one thing I never expected to do in life, it's to abscond with a man's wife!"

His laughter was infectious, and Grey couldn't help smiling, though it reopened the cut in his lip. Before he could take up his handkerchief to blot it, Percy had whipped out his own, and pressed it to Grey's mouth. He had stopped laughing, but still smiled, his fingers warm even through the linen cloth.

"I shall undertake your errand with pleasure, John," he said. "Though I would appreciate it very much if you can contrive not to be beaten to a pudding again before I come back."

Grey would have replied, but at this point, there was a discreet knock at the door, which opened to reveal Tom Byrd, a banyan and towel over his arm, who nodded to Wainwright before turning a minatory eye on Grey. "You'd best undress, me lord. Your bath is getting cold."

Chapter 16



In Which an Engagement Is Broken

Despite his injuries, Grey slept like the dead, and rose late. He was enjoying a leisurely and solitary breakfast in banyan and slippers when Tom Byrd appeared in the dining-room doorway, his face registering an excited alarm that made Grey drop a slice of buttered toast and rise to his feet.

"What?" he said sharply.

"It's the general, me lord."

"Which general? Sir George, do you mean?"

"Yes, me lord." With a hasty glance behind him, Tom stepped in and shut the door.

"What on earth—"

"Brunton doesn't know what to do, me lord," Tom interrupted, in a hoarse whisper. "He daren't let the general in, but he daren't turn him away, neither. He asked him to wait a moment, and sent me to run fetch you, fast."

"Why the devil would Brunton not let him in?" Grey was already heading for the door, brushing crumbs from his sleeves.

"Because the countess told him not to, I reckon," Tom said helpfully.

Grey stopped in his tracks, unable to believe his ears.

"What? Why should she do such a thing?"

Tom bit his lip.

"She, um, broke the engagement, me lord. And Sir George, he says he wants to know why."



What can she mean by this, Lord John?" Sir George, rescued from the stoop, was a study in agitation, wig awry and his waistcoat misbuttoned. "She gives no reason, no reason whatever!"

"She wrote to break off your understanding?"

"Yes, yes, she sent a note this morning...." Sir George fumbled at his pockets, searching, and eventually produced a crumpled bit of paper, which indeed said nothing beyond a simple statement that the countess regretted that she found their marriage impossible.

"I am not a handsome man," Sir George said, peering rather pathetically into the looking glass above the sideboard, and making a vain attempt to straighten his wig. "I know I am nothing to look at. I have money, but of course she does not need that. I had quite expected that she would refuse my proposal, but having accepted me ... I swear to you, Lord John, I have done nothing—nothing—that might be considered reprehensible. And if I have somehow offended her, of course I should apologize directly, but how can I do that, if I have no notion of my offense, and she will not see me?"

Grey found himself in sympathy with Sir George, and baffled by his mother's behavior.

"If you will allow me, sir?" He gently turned the general toward him, unbuttoned his waistcoat, and rebuttoned it neatly. "They, um, do say that women are changeable. Given to fits of irrational behavior."

"Well, yes, they do," the general agreed, appearing a little calmer. "And I have known a good many women who *are*, to be sure. Had one of them sent me such a note, I should merely have waited for a day or two, in order to allow her to regain her composure, then come round to call with an armful of flowers, and all would be well." He smiled bleakly.

"But your mother is not like that. Not like that at all," he repeated, shaking his head in helpless confusion. "She is the most logical woman I have ever met. To a point that some would consider unwomanly, in fact. Not myself," he added hastily, lest Grey suppose this to be an insult. "Not at all!"

This was true—his mother was both logical and plainspoken about it—and gave Grey fresh grounds for bemusement.

"Has something ... happened, quite recently?" he asked. "For that is the only circumstance I can conceive of which might explain her taking such an action."

Sir George thought fiercely, his upper lip caught behind his lower teeth, but was obliged to shake his head.

"There is nothing," he said helplessly. "I have been involved in no scandal. No *affaire*, no duello. I have not appeared the worse for drink in public—why, I have not even published a controversial letter in a newspaper!"

"Well, then there is nothing for it but to demand an explanation," Grey said. "You have a right to that, I think."

"Well, I thought so, too," Sir George said, exhibiting a sudden diffidence. "That is why I came. But I am afraid ... the butler said she had given orders ... I do not wish to make myself offensive...."

"What do you have to lose?" Grey asked bluntly. He turned to Tom, who had been making himself inconspicuous by the door, intending to tell him to have the countess's lady's-maid come down. He was forestalled, though, by the opening of the door.

"Why, Sir George!" Olivia's face lighted at sight of the general. "How lovely to see you! Does Aunt Bennie know you're here?"

She almost certainly did, Grey reflected. Whatever her present mental aberration, he was sure that his mother was still sufficiently logical as to have deduced the likely effect of her note, and would almost certainly have noticed Sir George's carriage drawing up in the street outside; it was elderly but solid, and of a sufficient size as to accommodate several passengers, and a small orchestra to entertain them *en route*.

That being so, she had probably also decided what to do when he *did* appear. And since she had given orders not to admit Sir George, the chances of Grey inducing her to come down from her boudoir and speak to the general without the use of a battering ram and manacles were probably slim.

Whilst he was drawing these unfortunate conclusions, Olivia had been eliciting the purpose of Sir George's visit from him, with consequent exclamations of dismay.

"But what can have made her do such an unaccountable thing?" Olivia turned to Grey, her agitation surpassing Sir George's. "We have sent the invitations! The wedding is next week! All of the clothes, the favors, the decorations! The arrangements for the wedding breakfast —everything is ready!"

"Everything except the bride, apparently," Grey observed. "She has not had a sudden attack of nerves, I suppose?"

Olivia frowned, running her hands absently over her protruding belly in a manner that made the general turn tactfully away, affecting to reexamine the sit of his wig in the looking glass.

"She was a bit odd at supper last night," she said slowly. "Very quiet. I supposed she was tired—we'd spent all day finishing the fitting of her gown. I didn't think anything of it. But ..." She shook her head, mouth firming up.

"She can't do this to me!" she exclaimed, and turning, headed for the stairs in the determined manner of a climber about to attempt the Hindoo Kush. Sir George, openmouthed, looked at Grey, who shrugged. Of them all, Olivia was likely the only one who could gain entrance to his mother's boudoir. And as he had said to Sir George, there was nothing to lose.

The general, relieved of Olivia's blatantly fecund presence, had left the looking glass and was pottering round the room, heedlessly picking things up and putting them down at random.

"You do not suppose this is meant as some sort of test of my devotion?" he asked, rather hopefully. "Like Leander swimming the Hellespont, that sort of thing?"

"I think if she had meant you to bring her a roc's egg or anything of the kind, she would have said so," Grey said, as kindly as possible.

Olivia had left the door ajar; he could hear raised voices upstairs, but could not make out what was being said. The general had halted in his erratic progress round the room, and was now staring at a potted plant in a morbid sort of way. He put out a hand to the mantelpiece, touching one of Benedicta's favorite ornaments, a commedia dell'arte figurine in the shape of a young woman in a striped apron. Grey was moved to see that the general's hand was shaking slightly.

"You are quite positive that nothing has happened?" he asked, more by way of distracting the general's mind than in actual hopes of discovering an answer. "If there was an event, it must have been quite recent, for she was fitting her wedding gown yesterday, and she would not have done that, if ..."

The general turned to him, grateful for the distraction, but still unable to conceive of an answer.

"No," he repeated, shaking his head in bafflement. "So far as I am aware, the only thing of note that has happened to *anyone* I know in the last twenty-four hours was your own adventure at Tyburn." His eyes focused suddenly on Grey. "Are you quite recovered, by the way? I beg your pardon, I should have inquired at once, but ..."

"Quite," Grey assured him, embarrassed. He could see himself in the glass over the general's shoulder, and while the night's sleep had improved his appearance considerably, he still sported a number of visible marks, to say nothing of a rough stubble of beard. "How did you ..."

"Captain MacLachlan mentioned it, when I saw him at my club last night. He ... ah ... was most impressed by your courage." There was a delicate tone of question in this last remark, inviting Grey to explain his behavior if he would, but not requiring it.

"The captain and his friend were of the greatest assistance to me," Grey said, and coughed.

The general was now regarding him closely, curiosity momentarily overcoming his worry.

"It was a most unfortunate affair," he said. "I knew Captain Bates quite well; he was my chief aide-de-camp, some years ago. Did you—that is, I presume that you were acquainted with him, also? Perhaps a club acquaintance?" This was put with the greatest delicacy, the general plainly not wishing to appear to link Grey in friendship with a convicted sodomite.

"I met him briefly, once," Grey said, wondering whether the general was aware of the political machinations behind Bates's trial and conviction. "A ... most interesting gentleman."

"Wasn't he," the general said dryly. "He was at one point a fine soldier. A great pity that he should end in such a manner. A very sordid affair, I am afraid. I am glad, though," he added, "that you were not badly injured. A Tyburn mob is a dangerous thing; I have seen men killed there—and with less provocation than you offered them."

"Tyburn?" a shocked voice said behind Grey. He whirled, to find Olivia staring at him, mouth open in astonishment. "You were at Tyburn yesterday?" Her voice rose. "It was *you* who seized the legs of that dreadful beast, and was set upon by the crowd?"

"What?" Tom, who had tactfully retired to the hallway, appeared behind Olivia, eyes popping. "That was you, me lord?"

"How did you hear of it?" Grey demanded, attempting to hide his discomfiture by dividing an accusatory glare between his cousin and his valet.

"My maid told me," Olivia replied promptly. "There's a broadsheet circulating, with a cartoon of you—though they didn't have your name, thank God—being drowned in the mud of perversion. What on *earth* possessed you, to do such a—"

"So that's what happened to your uniform!" Tom exclaimed, much affronted.

"And why were you at Tyburn in the first place?" Olivia demanded.

"I have not got to account to *you*, madam," Grey was beginning, with considerable severity, when yet another form joined the crowd in the doorway.

"What the devil have you been doing, John?" his mother said

There was no help for it. So much, Grey thought grimly, for trying to spare the feelings of his female relations, both of whom were staring at him as though he was a raving lunatic.

The countess listened to his brief account—from which he carefully omitted Mrs. Tomlinson and his own visit to Newgate—then sank slowly into a chair, put her elbows on the table among the breakfast things, and sank her head into her hands.

"I do *not* believe this," she said, her voice only slightly muffled. Her shoulders began to shake. Sir George exchanged appalled glances with Grey, then made a tentative move toward her, but stopped, clearly not sure whether any attempt at comfort might be well received. Olivia had no such compunctions.

"Aunt Bennie! Dearest, you mustn't be upset; Johnny's all right. Now, now ..." Olivia hovered over the countess for a moment, patting her shoulder. Then she bent closer, and her look of tender anxiety vanished suddenly.

"Aunt Bennie!" she said reproachfully.

Benedicta, Dowager Countess of Melton, sat up, reached for a napkin, and mopped at what were clearly now revealed to be tears of laughter.

"John, you will be the death of me yet," she said, sniffing and dabbing at her eyes. "What on *earth* were you doing at Tyburn?"

"I was passing by," he said stiffly, "and stopped to see what was happening."

She cast him a look of profound disbelief, but didn't take issue with this remark. Instead, she turned to Sir George, who had not ceased to gaze at her since her appearance.

"I owe you an apology, Sir George," she said. She took a deep breath. "And, I suppose, an explanation."

"Oh, no, my dear," the general said softly. "You owe me nothing. Not ever." But his heart was in his eyes, and she rose and came to him swiftly, taking his hand.

"I am sorry," she said, low-voiced but clear. "Do you still wish to marry me, George?"

"Oh, yes," he said, and without taking his rapt gaze from her face,

lifted her hand and kissed it.

"Well, I'm glad of that," she said. "But I shan't hold you to it, if you should change your mind as a result of what I tell you."

"Benedicta, I would take you bankrupt, in your shift," he said, smiling. His mother smiled back, and Grey cleared his throat.

"Tell us what, exactly?" he said.

"Don't presume upon my good nature," his mother said, turning and narrowing her eyes at him. "Part of this is your fault, telling feebleminded lies about being run down by mail coaches. I thought you were trying to hide the fact that you had been attacked again. Without cause, I mean."

"Indeed," Grey said, provoked. "Being attacked by a murderous crowd is quite all right, while being attacked by a random footpad is not?"

"That depends upon whether the attack on you and Percival Wainwright was random," the countess said. "Must we stand here in the midst of stale toast and kipper bones, or may we repair to a more civilized spot?"



Relocated to the drawing room and provided with coffee, the countess sat beside Sir George on the settee, her hand on his arm, and looked at Grey.

"After your father's death," she said, "I went to France for some time. Within a month of my return to England, I received three proposals of marriage. From three men whom I had reason to suspect of having been involved in the scandal that took your father's life. I refused them all, of course."

The general had stiffened at this, the happiness of his renewed engagement fading.

"From whom did you receive these proposals of marriage?" Grey asked, before the general could. His mother's eye rested on him.

"I decline to tell you," she said briefly.

"Do you decline to tell *me*, Benedicta?" The general's tone was somewhere between outrage and pleading.

"Yes, I do," the countess said crossly. "It is my private business, and I don't want the two of you—or the three, I suppose, since one of you would certainly tell Melton and put the cat among the pigeons for

good and all—to be poking into things that should be left alone. There may be nothing at all—I hope that is the case. If there *should* be any mischief afoot, though, I most assuredly don't want it to be made worse."

Sir George was disposed to argue, but Grey succeeded in catching his eye, whereupon he subsided, though with an expression indicating that his acquiescence was momentary.

"Did the journal pages have anything to do with these men?" Grey asked. "A page from my father's journal was left in my brother's office," he explained to the general and Olivia. "And, I rather think, another was sent to you, Mother?"

"As you so cleverly deduced, yes," his mother said, still cross. "Neither page referred to any of these three men, no. But your father did discuss things with me on occasion; I knew that he had suspicions regarding at least two of them. That being so, there was a possibility that he had written down his suspicions—perhaps with evidence confirming them—in his journal."

"Because, of course, the journal disappeared after his death," Grey said, nodding. "Do you know when it was taken?"

The countess shook her head. She wore a simple calico gown, but her hair had not yet been dressed for the day and was simply covered by a linen cap. Her color was high, and Grey thought it no wonder that the general was smitten; she was tired and strained, but undeniably was handsome for her age.

"I never thought to look. It was ... some time before I felt able to read any of his—of Pardloe's journals. Even then, I thought it likely that you or Melton had borrowed it. Who else would want it, after all?"

"A man who thought he might be mentioned in it, to his disadvantage," Grey said. "Why the devil is he scattering pages of it round at this point?"

"To indicate that he has it," his mother said promptly. "As for why ... I assumed that it was the announcement of my marriage to Sir George that precipitated the action."

Sir George jerked as though she had run a drawing pin into his leg. "What?" he said incredulously. "Why?"

The countess's fine-boned face showed the effects of what had likely been a sleepless night, but a glimmer of ironic humor showed in the curve of her mouth.

"You may be willing to take me in my shift, my dear. I did not think

that the proposals I had received were based upon simple desire of my person. That being so, they were based upon one of two things: my money and position—or the possibility that I posed a threat to the gentlemen in question, by virtue of what they supposed I might know."

Grey rubbed his knuckles over the stubble on his chin. The countess's money and position were considerable; her Scottish connexions were not so powerful as they had once been, in the wake of the South Sea scandal and the failed Risings, but the Armstrongs were still a force to be reckoned with.

"Were any of these gentlemen in a position to be tempted by your assets?" Grey asked.

"There are relatively few men who wouldn't be," Olivia put in, with surprising cynicism. "I have seldom met a man so rich that he didn't think he needed more."

Olivia was young, but not stupid, Grey reflected. And while she seemed not to have been damaged by her earlier engagement to a Cornish merchant prince named Trevelyan, the affair had evidently taught her a few things about the workings of the world.

Benedicta nodded approvingly at Olivia.

"Very true, my dear. But while one of the gentlemen in question could undeniably have used both money and influence, the other two were sufficiently endowed with worldly goods that they could certainly have done better for themselves than a widow past childbearing."

"So you assumed that their motive was to discover whether you were indeed a threat to their safety—and if so, to prevent it," Sir George said slowly.

The countess nodded, reached for her coffee, and, discovering it to be cold, put it back with wrinkled nose.

"I did. But I refused them, as I say, and continued to live quietly. One of them returned to press his suit, but eventually he gave up, as well."

The countess had not, so far as Grey knew, ever even considered remarriage, until she met Sir George.

"I can see why the journal pages should be distressing to you, Aunt Bennie," Olivia said, frowning. "But what purpose could they be intended to serve?"

Benedicta glanced at the general.

"At first, I wasn't sure. But then John was attacked and beaten in

the street, to no apparent purpose, which alarmed me very much." His mother's eye lingered on Grey's face, troubled. "And when I thought it had happened again yesterday ... I became sure that this was a warning, a threat to prevent my marriage."

Grey was thunderstruck.

"What? You thought—"

"I did, no thanks to you." His mother's look of concern had altered to annoyance. "I didn't want you killed next time, so I thought I would break the engagement and let it be publicly known. If there were no more such warnings, I would know that my deductions were correct, and I could proceed on that assumption."

"Whereas if you broke your engagement and I was consequently murdered in the street, you could reform your hypothesis. Quite." Heat rose in Grey's face. "For God's sake, Mother! When—if ever—did you propose to tell *me* any of this?"

"I am telling you," his mother said, with exaggerated patience. "One such instance might well have been coincidence, and the risks of my telling you wouldn't justify my doing so. Two is another matter.

"As for not telling you of my suspicions after the first incident ... if there was in fact no threat, I didn't want you or your brother going off and doing something foolish. I still don't. If you were in danger, though, then of course I had to speak. But as the second attack was in fact brought about by your own actions, it has no connexion, and we are back with an assumption of coincidence.

"If I'd known about your adventure at Tyburn"—and here her eye rested on him with the deepest suspicion; she knew damned well he wasn't telling her everything, no more than she was telling him everything—"I shouldn't have felt obliged to break the engagement. You really ought to apologize to Sir George for the inconvenience to his feelings, John."

The general had been increasingly restive through these explanations, and now burst forth.

"Benedicta! Should anyone—anyone!—be so rash as to offer violence to you or your sons, they will answer to me. Surely you know that!"

The countess regarded him with a sort of exasperated fondness.

"Well, that's a very gallant speech, Sir George, but the point is that I would prefer my sons to remain alive rather than to be avenged—though I am sure you would make an excellent job of vengeance, should that be necessary," she added, evidently intending this as a

palliative.

Grey was growing increasingly annoyed with the tone of these speeches, and put a stop to them by setting down his own coffee cup with a clatter.

"Why should anyone wish to prevent your marriage?"

It was Sir George who answered that, without hesitation.

"I said I would protect your mother and all that belongs to her—and am capable of doing so, I assure you. If Benedicta did know anything that might threaten one of these men, she might denounce them openly, once married to me."

Grey was more than affronted at the blatant assumption that he and Hal would be incapable of protecting the countess, but retained sufficient self-control as not to say so. He would admit that, viewed objectively, the general commanded more resources toward this end—and he might possibly be in a better position at least to exert some form of persuasion, if not actual control, upon the countess's behavior, which he and Hal assuredly could not. The limits of the general's own influence were just beginning to dawn on Sir George, he saw.

"I ... assume that you do *not* in fact know anything that might be dangerous to one of these men?" the general asked the countess, hesitantly.

"If she does, she isn't going to tell you," Grey informed him, forestalling his mother's answer. "One question, Mother, if you please. Is any one of the men in question a member of the regiment?"

She looked startled at the idea, and blurted, "God, no!" with such feeling as made it evident she spoke the truth.

"Well, then. As both Melton and myself will be embarking with the regiment in less than a month, I would suppose we can contrive to avoid being killed before that time, if in fact there is any threat. And once in Germany, we shall presumably be safe from attack." He glanced at his cousin, who had been listening to all of this with her mouth half open, eyes moving back and forth between the speakers like the pendulum of a clock.

"Do you suppose that Olivia is under any threat?"

"I don't think so," his mother said slowly. "I doubt that any of them even know that she has come to reside here while Malcolm Stubbs is in America."

"Then that leaves only your own safety to be secured," Grey pointed out. "You are bound for the West Indies, are you not, Sir George? If my mother were to accompany you, I daresay that you might be able

to protect her from any malicious attempts?"

A look of genial ferocity was spreading across Sir George's face.

"I should like to see 'em try," he said. He turned to the countess, his face flushed with animation. "Will you, Bennie? Will you come with me?"

"What, and leave Olivia by herself?"

Olivia sat up straight, enthused.

"Oh, no! I could go to Minnie—she's often asked me. We should have such fun together—oh, do, Aunt Bennie, do go!"

The countess eyed her niece for a moment, assessing her sincerity, then sighed and turned to Sir George.

"I daresay I will be in much more danger from pestilence, seasickness, and vipers than from anything London can offer. But all right. Yes, I'll go."

It was not yet noon, but the bell was rung and sherry sent for, and a general toast drunk to the renewed engagement. It was only as Grey finally went upstairs to get dressed that he recalled his mother's words regarding probability.

It hadn't occurred to him to connect his encounter with the O'Higginses in Hyde Park with the later attack by Jed and his companion in Seven Dials. The O'Higginses had, of course, indignantly denied being anywhere in the vicinity, and had produced at least sixteen witnesses to testify that they were virtuously engaged in a drinking bout in a shed behind the barracks at the time of the incident. And even if he was morally sure of their identity, there was nothing to say that they had lain in wait for *him*; in fact, their recognition of him had been what made them flee. But still ...

One attack might be coincidence, the countess had said. Two is another matter.



Grey told Hal the next day about the breaking and reestablishment of the countess's engagement, with its consequent revelations.

"I heard about the business at Tyburn," his brother remarked, eyeing him. "Do you want to tell me what *that* was about? Because I don't for an instant think you just happened to be there."

Grey was tempted to tell him about the conversation he had had with Captain Bates in Newgate, but there was no way to explain his acquiescence without mention of Hubert Bowles, which in turn might lead to questions neither of them would wish to have either asked or answered.

"No," he said simply. "Not now."

Hal accepted this without further comment; he could be ruthless in pursuit of any matter he believed to be his business—but by the same token, was willing to let other people mind their own.

"Mother gave no hint of the identity of any of these men?" The automaton's cabinet was still in the corner, but Hal had the jar of mottoes and fortunes on his desk, and was dipping into it at random, drawing out a folded slip, reading it, and tossing it back.

"No. Do you think they exist?" That was a thought that had come to Grey in the night, that the countess might have invented these nebulous figures. Though in that case, he was at a loss to explain why she had broken the engagement.

"Oh, yes. I could put a name to two of them, I think." Hal unfolded a new slip. "He who throws dirt is losing ground," he read. "Do you suppose the O'Higginses wrote these themselves?"

"Oh? Who?" Grey kept his voice casual, though his pulse leapt. "As for the O'Higginses, I doubt they can write."

"Good point." Hal dropped the slip back into the jar, and shook it. "Captain Rigby—Gilbert Rigby—and Lord Creemore. I happened to be in England when Mother came back from France, and called upon her almost every day. She had a good many visitors—but I tended to meet those two most frequently, and to find them alone with her."

Grey reached into the jar, to hide the small flare of resentment he felt at this reference to a time in which he had been excluded from his family's affairs.

"He who laughs at himself never runs out of things to laugh at," he read, and smiled reluctantly. "I recall Captain Rigby, from before Father died, very vaguely—he brought his dog, as I recall—but I don't believe I know Lord Creemore."

"Perhaps not by his title. His name is George Longstreet," Hal said dryly. He plucked another fortune, read it, and, shaking his head, tossed it back.

"Why are you telling me about them now?" Grey asked, curious. "The last time I inquired about the circumstances following Father's death, you declined to insult my intelligence by answering my questions."

"Do not mistake temptation for opportunity." Hal read a new one,

dropped it, and leaned back in his chair, surveying his brother.

"I didn't want to tell you, because I knew if I did, you'd be off poking sticks into hornets' nests, and there was no point in stirring up things that have lain quiet for years. But now ..." Hal looked him over slowly, taking in the remnant bruises, and shook his head. "If there's anything to Mother's theory that you were attacked as a warning to her to keep silence, there's a possibility of it happening again. If that's the case, you need to know as much as possible, for your own safety."

"I'm touched at your concern," Grey said dryly—but was, nonetheless. "Since the regiment sails in a few weeks' time, I doubt I'll be able to molest many hornets."

"Well, yes, there's that," Hal agreed cordially. "I don't propose to give you time to sleep, let alone roam about London overturning stones in search of long-hidden Jacobites."

"You do, however, propose to tell me what you know about Mother's erstwhile suitors." Grey fished out another motto, and unfolded it.

Hal chewed the inside of his cheek for a moment, thinking, then heaved a sigh.

"Right. I'm guessing about Rigby, but I know for a fact that Longstreet—as he was then—proposed to Mother, because I caught him in the act of doing so."

"Indeed," Grey said, fascinated. "You put a stop to it?"

Hal shot him a narrow look, then coughed.

"Indirectly," he said, and hurried on. "Rigby was one of Walpole's crowd at the time; Walpole came himself to call on Mother—kind of him; it would have been much worse without his making a show of his interest—and he sent his secretary and his aides frequently to the house, as his health kept him from going out. That's how Rigby came to know Mother, I think."

"And Longstreet?"

"Never mind Longstreet," Hal said shortly. "I'll deal with him myself."

"That remark about hornets' nests ..."

"Exactly. Keep away from him."

That was evidently all he was going to hear about Longstreet, at least for the moment. Grey allowed the subject to drop, returning to the larger issue.

"Does it seem at all plausible to you?" Grey asked. "This theory of Mother's?"

Hal hesitated, then nodded.

"It does," he said, "but only if Mother actually *does* know something that could be injurious to someone."

"Or if that someone thinks she does. But what can she know," Grey added, "that would be so dangerous as to justify this kind of hocuspocus?"

Hal shook his head.

"I don't see how she can have evidence of anything concrete; if she had, surely she would have produced it at the time of the ... the scandal. All she might know would be the identity of someone who was not only a Jacobite at the time, but a man who had substantial position—and likely still does."

That made sense. Anti-Jacobite feeling had died down of latter years, with the defeat of Charles Stuart's army, but an accusation of Jacobitism was still an effective tarbrush, wielded by politicians or the press.

"Longstreet would have been vulnerable to a threat of exposure then, and would be now," Grey said. "What about Captain Rigby?"

Hal actually smiled at that.

"I suppose so," he said. "He's presently Director of the Foundling Hospital." He unfolded another motto, laughed, and read it aloud: "A conclusion is simply the place where one grows tired of thinking."

Grey smiled at that, and stood up.

"Then I suppose we've reached a conclusion for now. Will you tell me what you discover regarding Longstreet?"

A flicker of something passed through his brother's eyes, but was gone too quickly for Grey to interpret it.

"I'll tell you anything you need to know," Hal said. "In the meantime, haven't you business to do?"

"I have," Grey said, and left. Hidden in his hand, he carried the last slip of paper he had taken from the automaton's jar. *The one you love* is closer than you think, it said.

Six days until the wedding. Four days—perhaps five—until Percy Wainwright returned from Ireland.



Hal had not been joking about allowing him no time to sleep. Grey could feel the regiment beginning to rise from winter quarters and

prepare for war, like a bear shaking off the sleep of hibernation, feeling the first rumblings of appetite. And men, like bears, must be fed.

Unlike bears, they must also be clothed, housed, armed, trained, disciplined, and moved from place to place. And then, of course, there was the military hierarchy, a many-headed beast with voracious appetites of its own.

Grey's days were a blur of activity, rushing from Whitehall offices to shipping offices, holding daily councils of war with the other officers, receiving and reviewing daily reports from the captains, writing daily summary reports for the colonels, reading orders, writing orders, hastily donning dress uniform and dashing out to leap on a horse in time to take his place at the head of a column to march through the London streets in a guildhall procession to the cheers of a crowd, then throwing the reins to a groom and brushing the horsehair from his uniform in a carriage on his way to a ball at Richard Joffrey's house, where he must dance with the ladies and confer in corners with the gentlemen, the ministers who ran the machine of war, and the merchants who greased its gears.

The one redeeming aspect of such affairs was that food was served, often his only opportunity to eat since breakfast.

It was at one such gathering that Hal came up beside him and said quietly, "Lord Creemore is ill."

Such was Grey's state of starvation and mental preoccupation that he didn't recall at once who Lord Creemore was, and said merely, "Oh? Pity," without taking his attention from the sardines on toast he had accepted from a passing footman.

Hal gave him a narrow look, and repeated with some emphasis, "Lord Creemore is ill. Very ill, I'm told. He hasn't been out of his house in two months."

"Ah!" said Grey, realization dawning. "George Longstreet." He ate the sardines in two bites and washed them down with a gulp of champagne. "Probably not in any condition to hire thugs and plant documents, you think?"

"I think not. Here comes that tedious ass Adams; you talk to him—if I do, I'll throttle him." With a perfunctory nod, Hal strode past the Ordnance minister and shouldered his way into the crowd. Sighing, Grey drained his champagne glass, put it on a passing tray, and took a fresh one.

"Mr. Adams," he said. "Your servant, sir."

"Wasn't that Lord Melton?" Bernard Adams, who was short of sight, squinted dubiously toward the end of the room where Hal had made his escape. "I wanted to speak with him, regarding the extravagance of his request for ..."

Grey drained another glass, listening to the tall clock in the corner chiming midnight, and thought how pleasant it would be to turn into a pumpkin and sit inert at Adams's feet, impervious to the man's blather.

Instead, he fixed his eyes on the mole to the right of Adams's mouth, nodding and grimacing periodically as he worked his way methodically through three more glasses of champagne and a plate of bacon savories.

Dropping into bed three hours later, in a haze of fatigue and alcohol, he managed to remain awake for a few seconds, in which he wondered whether he would recognize Percy Wainwright upon his return from Ireland, let alone remember what to do with him.

Chapter 17



In Which a Marriage Takes Place, among Other Things

On the 27th of February, the marriage of General Sir of George Stanley and Benedicta, Dowager Countess Melton, was celebrated at the church of St. Margaret's, the parish church of Westminster Abbey.

It was not a large wedding, but one done in the best of taste, as Horace Walpole, one of the guests, remarked approvingly. Olivia had had the church decorated simply with evergreen boughs, done up in ribbons of gold tissue, and the scent of pine and cedar lent a welcome freshness to the at mosphere of ancient wax and bodies kept too long enclosed. Composed in equal parts of military dignitaries, politicals, and social ornaments, the congregation shone nearly as brightly as the four hundred candles, a-glimmer with gold lace and diamonds.

"With my goods I thee endow, with my body I thee worship ..."

Grey, in the front pew with Percy Wainwright, was close enough to see the expression on the general's face, which surprised him with its soft intensity. He was the more surprised—and not a little taken aback—to catch an answering flash of response from the countess's eyes.

He experienced that peculiar crawling of the flesh that attends any child's sudden realization that a parent must not only have engaged at some comfortably primeval date in the theoretical carnal act that resulted in his own existence—but was capable of doing it again in the all-too-physical present.

He glanced quickly at Percy, to see whether this *frisson* of horror was shared, but saw only an expression of subdued wistfulness on Percy's mobile face. Of course it would not be the same, he reminded himself; the general was in fact not Percy's father. There would be no bar to his imagining—he choked *that* line of thought off at the root, staring hard at Percy in order to avoid looking at the wedding couple.

The light from one of the stained-glass windows caught a few tiny dark bristles, missed in shaving, just beneath Percy's lower lip. It shone through the amber irises of his eyes and touched his flesh with rose and gold.

Grey sincerely hoped that his new brother was not thinking—Percy looked suddenly sideways and met his eyes. Grey took a deep breath

and looked away, fixing his gaze on a stained-glass window illustrating the martyrdom of Saint Lawrence, roasted on a gridiron.

They stood close together, the full skirts of their coats brushing. He felt a stirring among the folds of blue velvet, and Percy's hand brushed his.

No more than a touch, but he breathed deep, and embarrassment faded into awareness.

Tonight.

They had made a solemn pact, the two of them. After the wedding breakfast, they would go away and spend the rest of the day—and the night—together, though hell should bar the way.

Grey crooked one finger round one of Percy's, very briefly, then let go. He realized that his thoughts had gone well beyond the limits of what was suitable in church, and tried to force his attention back to the solemn spiritual event being enacted in front of him. Though why the church had thought to put things like "with my body I thee worship" into the service ...

He caught sight of Olivia, discreetly lurking behind one of the slender stone pillars—far too slender to hide her current grand proportions. He smiled, then noticed that her face was pale, set in a pained grimace. No doubt recalling her own nuptials and missing Malcolm, he thought sympathetically.

It might be two years before the gallant Captain Stubbs returned, by which time his first offspring would be—

Olivia's grimace deepened, and her face went purple. Grey gripped the back of the pew in sudden consternation, and Percy glanced curiously at him. Grey lifted his chin, trying to indicate Olivia's alarming behavior, but Percy's view of her was blocked by the pillar and a carved wooden screen. He frowned at Grey in puzzlement, and Grey leaned forward a bit, trying to see whether—but Olivia had disappeared.

The bishop was discoursing comfortably upon the honorable estate of marriage and looked well set to continue upon this course for some time. Grey tried by means of various small jerks of the head and grimacing of his own to alert one of the women on the other side of the aisle, but—beyond frowns of puzzlement from the elderly Havisham sisters and a flirtatious glance behind her fan from Lady Sheridan—was unable to elicit any response.

"What is it?" Percy whispered.

"Don't know." She couldn't possibly have fainted without someone

noticing. Perhaps gone outside for air?

"Maybe nothing. Stay here," he whispered back, and slipping past Percy, left the pew as quietly as he might and walked rapidly down the side aisle, head lowered and the back of his hand pressed to his mouth, as though he might be indisposed.

He reached the vestibule and flung open the heavy outer door, causing a premature flurry of "hurrahs!" and a smart clash of swords from the waiting honor guard, who snapped into formation, making an archway for the happy couple.

Contorting his face into what he hoped was apology, Grey made abortive waving motions at the indignant swordsmen and shut the door hastily upon a chorus of disgruntled oaths.

Muttering a few of his own, he made his way back into the church and along the right-hand aisle, glancing furtively into the alcove that held the baptismal font, up into the crowded galleries—for God's sake, an enormously pregnant woman could not simply vanish in the midst of a crowded church!

He ducked into the secluded side chapel, but no one was there. A single candle burned before the statue on the altar, a rather blank-faced thing with outspread hands—Christ Intercessor, he thought Olivia had said it was. At this point, though, he'd take help where he could get it.

"Ah ... perhaps you wouldn't mind lending a hand?" he whispered, not knowing any official prayers for the purpose. "If you please." With a polite nod, he withdrew and resumed his hunt, this time going back down the nave toward the door. What if she had meant to go out, but been overcome before reaching the egress?

He scanned the pews covertly as he passed, in case she might merely have gone to sit down with friends, but received nothing save curious looks from the inhabitants. He reached the door to the vestibule again, and hesitated, unsure where to search next. Whether by heavenly intercession or luck, at this point he spotted a small wooden door set inconspicuously in the shadows beneath the organ gallery.

He tried the door, and finding it unlocked, pushed it cautiously inward—only to have it stick halfway. He was about to give it a healthy shove, when he perceived the foot just beyond it, clad in a lemon-yellow silk slipper.

"Olivia!" He thrust his head through the opening, and found his cousin seated on the bottom step of a small stairway, looking like an

untidy heap of lemon-yellow laundry. Seeing him, she withdrew her foot, allowing him to open the door enough to sidle through.

"Olivia! Are you unwell?"

"No!" she hissed. "For heaven's sake, keep your voice down, John!"

"Shall I fetch someone to you?" he whispered, bending down to look at her. There was not much light here, only what filtered down the stairwell from the loft above. As the light was coming through a window over the loft, it fell down the stairs in a wash of the most delicate hues, with watery lozenges of pink and blue and gold that made Olivia appear to be sitting at the foot of a rainbow.

"No, no," she assured him. "I only felt tired and wanted to sit down for a bit."

He glanced skeptically at their surroundings.

"And you decided to sit down here, rather than in a pew. Quite. Will I go and fetch you some water?" The nearest water to hand was likely the baptismal font, and the only vessel in which he could carry it was his hat, which he had inadvertently brought away with him. Still ...

"I don't need—" Her voice broke off and she arched her back a little, eyes and lips squeezing shut. She put one hand behind her, pressing a fist into her lower back. Her face had gone purple again; he could see that, despite the light.

He wished to rush back into the church and fetch a woman to her at once, but was afraid to leave her thus in mid-spasm. He'd been in the general vicinity of women birthing—soldiers' wives and camp followers—but had never witnessed the process at close quarters. His impression was that it involved a good deal of screaming, though; Olivia wasn't doing that. Yet.

She blew out air through pursed lips, relaxed, and opened her eyes.

"How long have you been doing ... that?" He gestured delicately at her bulging midsection. Not that the answer would be of help; he hadn't any notion how long this process was meant to take.

"Only since this morning," she assured him, and put a hand to the small of her back, grimacing again. He wished she wouldn't; she looked like nothing so much as one of the gargoyles on the pediment outside. "Don't worry, everybody says first babies take ages. Days, sometimes," she added, letting out held breath in a gasp.

"In your position, I think I would not find that an encouraging thought at the moment." He turned, hand to the door. "I'm going to fetch someone."

"No!" She sprang to her feet, surprising him extremely, as he hadn't thought she could move at all, let alone so fast. She clung ferociously to his arm. "Nothing is going to interfere with this wedding, do you hear me? Nothing!"

"But you—"

"No!" Her face was an inch from his, eyes bulging in a commanding stare that would not have disgraced a sergeant conducting drills on the square. "I've worked over these arrangements for six months, and I won't have them undone now! Don't you take one step out there!"

He paused, but she clearly meant it. And she wasn't letting go of his sleeve, either. He sighed and gave in—for the moment.

"All right. For heaven's sake, though, sit down."

Instead, she clenched her teeth and pressed suddenly hard against the door, grinding her back against the wood. Her belly had firmed up in some indefinable fashion, so that it seemed even larger, if such a thing was possible. There was so little room at the foot of the stairs that the enormous swell of it brushed against him, and the air was filled with the smell of sweat and something sweetly animal, completely overpowering the feeble scents of powder and eau de toilette.

She was clenching her hands, as well as her teeth, and he found that he was doing precisely the same thing. Also holding his breath.

She relaxed and exhaled, and so did he.

"For God's sake, Olivia!"

She was leaning against the door, feet braced, hands cupping her enormous belly, her eyes still closed, breathing. She opened one eye and looked at him.

"You," she said. "Be quiet." And closed it again.

He eyed her bulk. He couldn't escape to fetch help, with her leaning against the door. In normal circumstances, he could have removed her, but the circumstances were anything but normal. She had wedged herself solidly into the doorframe, and he could see no convenient way of getting to grips with her.

Besides, she was panting like a bellows. What if she had another of those alarming spasms, just as he was in the act of dragging her from the—a draft of cool air struck the back of his neck, and he glanced up, startled.

Up. He glanced back at Olivia, whose eyes were still closed in a frown of the most ferocious determination, then wheeled and sprinted up the stair before she could stop him.

He popped up next to the child working the bellows, who gaped at sight of him and left off pumping. A hiss from the organist started him again, though he continued to stare at Grey. The organist, hands and feet poised over manuals, pedals, and stops, ignored him completely, peering instead into a small mirror mounted on the organ, which allowed him to see the proceedings at the altar below.

Grey went hastily to the railing, just in time to see General Stanley sweep his mother into an embrace of such exuberant and obvious affection that the congregation broke into applause. Frantic, Grey jabbed his hands into his pockets, looking for some small missile, and came up with a paper of the boiled sweets he had bought for Percy, who had a sweet tooth.

Who? Anyone, he thought. Any woman, at least. All heads were turned toward the altar, where the bishop was raising his hands for the final blessing. Taking a deep breath and commending his soul to God, Grey pegged one of the sweets into the congregation. He'd aimed to strike the pew near Lady Anthony, one of his mother's close friends seated near the back. Instead, he struck her husband, Sir Paul, squarely in the back of the neck. The baronet jerked and clapped a hand to the spot, as though stung by a bee.

Sir Paul glared wildly round, looking in every direction but up. Grey picked another sweet and was searching for a better target, when a small stir toward the front made him look there. Percy Wainwright had made his way out of the pew, and was heading for the back of the church, nearby heads turning curiously to follow him.

Abandoning his strategy, Grey raced past the organist and down the stairs. Almost too late, he saw Olivia, collapsed again at the foot of the stairs. Panicked at the thought of help escaping, he put both hands against the narrow walls and vaulted over her, coming down with a thump at the foot of the stair. He snatched open the door, just in time to find Percy outside it, looking startled.

He leaned out, seized Percy by the sleeve, and yanked him into the tiny space.

"Help me get her out!"

"What? My God! All right. Where shall we take her?" Percy was sidling round Olivia's feet, evidently trying to decide what to take hold of. A peculiar whooshing noise made him shy back.

"Oh, Jesus!" Grey said, looking in horror at the spreading pool of liquid at his feet. "Olivia, are you all right?"

"It isn't blood," Percy said dubiously, trying without success to keep

clear of the puddle.

"My new dress!" Olivia wailed.

"I'll buy you a new one," Grey promised. "Two. Olivia, you have to stand up. Can you stand up?"

"Shall I fetch someone? A doctor?" Percy made a tentative motion toward the door, but was forestalled by Olivia's seizing the skirt of his coat.

"Just ... wait," she said, sitting up and panting. "It's all right. It's—" Her face went quite blank, and then suddenly assumed a look of the utmost concentration. Her hand fell from Percy's coat and went to her belly. Her eyes went round, and so did her mouth.

If she screamed, it was drowned by a blast of organ music.

"Oh, God." Grey was on his knees, pawing through an unending mass of yellow silk. Now there was blood, though not a great deal. "Oh, God, are you all right, Olivia?"

"I don't really think so, John." Percy was shouting to be heard over the music, squashed in beside her on the step, frantically trying to stroke her hair and mop her face with his handkerchief simultaneously. "Is she meant to—" His words were lost as the organist hit the pedals, the great diapasons opened above, and the staircase shook with the sound.

Grey had located a leg under the silk, straining with effort. Its fellow had to be there somewh—there. He gripped Olivia's knees in what he hoped was a reassuring fashion, trying not to look at what might be happening between them.

Suddenly Olivia slid down, pressing back against Percy so hard that Grey heard his grunt above the music. Percy gripped her by the shoulders, bracing her disheveled head against his chest. Grey felt a sort of subterranean shudder go through her body, rather like the waves of sound that beat on them, and looked down involuntarily.

There was a crash nearby as the outer doors were flung open, and to the clash of swords and the cheers of soldiers, a long purple object slithered out into Grey's hands, accompanied by a gush of fluids that did his cream silk breeches no good at all.



"You must both be godfathers," Olivia informed them, from the bower of her bed at Jermyn Street. She looked fondly down at the infant glued to her breast.

Grey glanced at Percy, who was beaming at mother and child, as though he were a Renaissance artist specializing in studies of *Madonna e bambino*.

"We should be honored," he told his cousin, smiling. "And now I think you must rest. And we must go to the Turkish baths. You realize this will be the second suit of clothes I've burned this month?"

Olivia disregarded this, lost in admiration of the little boy in her arms.

"What do you think? John Percival Malcolm Stubbs? Or Malcolm John Percival?"

"Call him Oliver," Percy suggested, cleaning his hands with the remnants of a very stained handkerchief.

"Oliver?" Olivia looked puzzled. "Why Oliver?"

"Cromwell," Grey explained, understanding instantly what Percy meant. "He's got the roundest head I've ever seen."

Olivia gave him a cross-eyed look, then revelation dawned.

"Oh, *Cromwell*!" she said, but instead of laughing, squinted thoughtfully at the child. "Cromwell Stubbs? I quite like it!"

Chapter 18



Finally

The room was small and clean, but had very little in the way of amenities beyond a bed, a basin, and a pot. It did, however, *have* a bed, and that, at the moment, was the only real consideration.

He saw it over Percy's shoulder, as his new stepbrother pushed open the door—which had a lock, still better—and crossed the narrow room to push back the curtain. Cool gray snow light flooded in, making the room—and Percy's flesh—seem to glow, dark as it was.

"Damned cold," Percy said, turning toward him with a grimace of apology. "I'll light the fire ... shall I?" He moved toward the tiny hearth as though to do so, but stopped, hand hovering over the tinderbox, dark eyes fixed on John's.

Grey felt his pulse throb painfully through his chilled hands, and fumbled a little as he drew off his gloves and dropped them. He threw off greatcoat and coat together in a thump of snowy weight, crossed the narrow room in two paces and seized Percy in his arms, sliding his hands under Percy's cloak, his coat, jerking the shirt from the waistband of his breeches, and sinking his freezing fingers into the warmth of Percy's skin.

Percy yelped at the cold abruptness of his touch, laughed and kneed him in the thigh, then pushed him back, and with one hand began to unbutton Grey's shirt, the other, his own. Grey interrupted him, hastily jerking at his own buttons, popping one off in reckless haste, so eager to resume his acquaintance with that lovely, warm smooth flesh.

Their breath rose white, mingled. He felt the gooseflesh rough on Percy's shoulders, the shiver of frozen air on his own bare ribs, and half clad, dragged Percy whooping into the icy bed, breeches still about his knees.

"What?" Percy protested, laughing and squirming. He kicked madly at the bedclothes, trying to free himself from the breeches. "Are you nothing but a beast? May I not have even the smallest kiss before—"

Grey stopped his words with his own mouth, feeling the rasp of Percy's beard, its tiny bristles, and nipped at the soft, full lip, still stained with wine. "All you like," he gasped, breaking the kiss for a gulp of air. "And, yes, I am a beast. Make the best of it." Then returned to the fray, struggling to get closer, desperate for the heat of Percy's body.

Percy's own cold hand slid down between them, grasped him. Cold as the touch was, it seemed to burn. He felt the seam of his breeches give as Percy shoved them roughly down and wondered dimly what he would tell Tom. Then Percy's prick rubbed hard against his own, stiff, hot, and he stopped thinking.



Neither of them had thought to lock the door. That was the first conscious thought to drift through his mind, and alarm brought him upright. The house was still, the room quiet save the whisper of the snow against the window and the comforting sound of Percy's breathing. Still, he slid out of the cozy warmth of the bedclothes, and picking up Percy's cloak from the floor, wrapped it about his naked body and went shivering to lock the door.

The rattle of the key disturbed Percy, who rolled over in the bed with a groan of sleepy yearning.

"Come back," he whispered.

"I'll light the fire," Grey whispered back.

The heat of their efforts had taken the frozen edge from the air, but the room was still achingly cold. The luminous glow from the window gave enough light for him to make out the dark shape of the basket that held Percy's meager supply of wood and kindling. He felt beside it and groping, knocked away the small, cold square of the tinderbox; it slid across the slate of the hearth, and was furred with ash and dust when he picked it up. No one had swept the room in some time; he supposed that Percy's means did not allow him to employ a woman to clean, though his sheets and linen were laundered.

He was acutely conscious of Percy as he worked. Small memories of the body lingered on his mouth, in his hands, making them uncertain with steel and flint. He felt Percy's eyes on his back, heard the small rustlings of quilts as that lithe bare body shifted in the bed.

His mouth tasted of Percy. Each man has his own taste; Percy tasted, very faintly, of mushrooms—wood morels, he thought; truffles, perhaps. Something rare, from deep in the earth.

The steel chimed and sparks flew, glowed brief against the char but

didn't catch. He had tasted himself once, out of curiosity; faintly salt, bland as egg white. Perhaps Percy would think differently?

A spark caught, its red heart swelling, and he thrust a straw hastily upon it. There. Fire caught at the tip, burst suddenly gold along its length, and he dropped it onto the careful pile of straw and paper he had built, reaching for the sticks that would usher the infant flame into full birth.

He stood then, stretching cramped legs, waiting to be sure the fire was well and truly caught. He heard Percy draw breath behind him, as though to speak, but he didn't.

He wanted to speak himself, say something in acknowledgment of what they had shared—but found himself unaccountably shy, and turned instead to the window, looking out at the white-covered roofs of London, humped like slumbering beasts, silent under the falling snow.

The exudations of their mingled breath, their sweat, ran in rivulets down the window.

The sky was an unearthly grayish-pink, suffused with light from the hidden moon; light shone like crystal in the droplets of moisture. He touched one with his finger and it disappeared, a small clear circle of wetness on the glass. Slowly, he drew a heart, standing a little aside so Percy could see—and then put his own initials, Percy's below. He heard a soft laugh from the bed, and seemed to feel warmth flow between them.

He'd had Percy's arse twice, and loved every second of it, from the first tentative slick probings to the piercing sense of conquest and possession—so thrilling that he would have prolonged it indefinitely, save for the irresistible onrush that emptied him so completely he forgot himself and Percy both.

The fire had caught well. He stooped and thrust a good-size stick of wood into it, then another.

He was chary of lending his own arse, and seldom did, not liking the sense of being so dominated by another.

He'd been raped once, years ago, and managed to dismiss the memory as a minor misfortune. But there was always since a moment, an instant of something not quite panic, when he felt his flesh obliged to yield so suddenly to that demand. Hector, of course—but Hector had come before.

He could feel Percy waiting for him, but delayed, torn between desire itself and the urge to wait, so that desire gratified should be that much more delight.

The warmth of Percy's body called him, and the thought of that long—longer than his own, but not much—silken prick. Large-knobbed, he thought. He'd not seen it yet. What would it look like, come daylight?

Daylight was a good way off. The muffled reverberation of a church bell reached him and he waited, counting. They were deep in the night; hours yet of darkness. Privacy.

The bedclothes rustled, restive.

Should he? He thought Percy would not insist. But simple decency ... He grimaced, not quite smiling at the irony of such consideration, in a situation where no normal person would even think the word "decency."

A louder rustle of bedclothes, and Percy's breath. Was Percy coming to him? No, he'd stopped. Afraid to presume, he thought, shy of pressing a desire that might not be welcomed. He turned, then, and looked at Percy.

The lively face was still, eyes no longer warm but hot as the embers of the growing fire at his back. Heat embraced his legs, touched his buttocks. He let the cloak fall and stood naked, the hairs of his body stirring in the rising air.

His own long hair was disheveled, but still bound. Percy's curls were clipped short, to allow of a wig, but now standing on end, damp, and spiked as the devil's horns. Slowly, he reached back and pulled the ribbon from his hair.

"Do you want me?" Grey asked, voice low, as though he might be heard beneath the sleeping roofs outside.

"You know that I do." Percy's answer was softer still, and his gaze burned where it touched him.

He breathed deeply, turned, crossed his arms upon the chimneypiece, and bent his head upon them, braced. He spread his bare feet apart, feeling grit beneath his soles.

"Come, then," he said. And waited, eyes closed, the breath of the fire fierce on his balls.



"Shall I tell you a great secret?" Percy's voice was soft, breath warm in his ear. Grey reached a hand through the sheets, slid it over the high round of a still warmer buttock.

"Please," he whispered.

"My name is not Percival."

His hand stayed where it was, but he turned his head. Percy's face was turned away from him, half buried in the whiteness of the pillow.

"Really," Grey said slowly, not sure if this were meant as a jest or ... if not a jest, what? "What *is* your name, then? Are you confessing that you are in actuality Desperate Dick, the highwayman? Or younger brother to the Pretender? Because if so—"

Percy rose suddenly in a flurry of sheets and hit him hard on the arm.

"Oh," he said, in a different tone of voice. He fumbled through the sheets again and laid his hand on Percy's thigh. He squeezed in apology, and waited.

He could hear Percy's breath, deep and uneven, and feel the tension in the leg under his hand.

"I ... told you that my father was minister to a particular sect of Methodists," Percy said at last.

"You did," Grey replied cautiously.

"I rather think you have not many Methodists among your acquaintance, John?"

"None, that I know of." Where on earth was this leading? The one thing he was sure of was that it was no joke. The spot on his upper arm where Percy had hit him throbbed; he'd have a bruise come morning.

Percy made a sound, not quite a laugh.

"I am not surprised. Methodists are rather severe in outlook; my father's sect particularly so. They would consider you and your family most frivolous and ungodly."

"Would they, indeed?" Grey spoke a little coldly. He would admit to a general laxness in churchgoing—his mother and cousin attended to that end of things—but frivolous? *Him?*

"My father would have considered the Archbishop of Canterbury frivolous, John," Percy said, plainly perceiving the affront. He laughed a little unsteadily, took a deep breath, and lay down on his back, drawing the sheet up over his chest.

"My name is Perseverance," he said in a rush.

"Per—" Grey lay completely still, holding his breath and concentrating fiercely on his belly muscles.

"Go ahead and laugh," Percy said from the dark, with exceeding

dryness. "I won't mind."

"Yes, you would," Grey said, but was still unable to quell the bubble of mirth that rose up the back of his throat, and being there firmly suppressed, emerged through his nose in a strangled snort. To keep from committing further offense, he said the first thing that came into his mind.

"What's your middle name?"

Percy laughed, sounding a little easier, now that the dreadful confession was made.

"Middle names are a useless ostentation, an ornament of arrogance, and a mark of the damnation to be visited upon those who fester in the surfeit of their pride. One Christian name is enough for any Godfearing soul," Percy replied with mock severity. "I imagine you've got two or three of them, haven't you?"

"No, just the one," Grey assured him, rolling over to face him. "And not even anything sinfully exotic like Achilles or Oswald, I'm afraid—it's a very pedestrian William. Jesus," he said, struck by a sudden realization. "What am I to call you now? I *can't* call you Percy anymore, not with a straight face." Something else occurred to him.

"Does the general know?"

"He does not," Percy said, with certainty. "Since my mother died, no one at all has known it, save myself."

"She wouldn't have told him?"

"No," Percy said softly. "She knew how I ... She knew. She never called me anything but Percy."

Grey wondered for a moment whether Percy meant that his mother had known ... but surely not. Even if so, that was a discussion for another time. Just now, he was realizing exactly the magnitude of the gift Percy had given him.

He was the only one who knew. Percy had been right; it was a great secret, and John felt the weight of his lover's trust, warm on his heart.

He groped for Percy's hand and found it, slightly cold. They lay silent for a bit, side by side, holding hands, bodies warming to each other.

A church bell chimed the hour, then struck. He counted out the long, slow strokes, and felt Percy doing the same thing beside him. Midnight. A long time yet 'til dawn.

The bell fell silent, and the air shivered and rippled, falling still around them like the water of a pool.

"Shall I tell you a great secret?" Grey whispered, at long last. The

room was dark, but his eyes were well accustomed to it by now; black beams crisscrossed the whitewashed ceiling above, so close that he might touch one if he sat up.

"Please." Percy's hand tightened on his.

"My father was murdered."



"I found him, you see." The words came with surprising ease, as though he had told the story many times—and he supposed he had, though only to himself.

"He was in the conservatory. The conservatory had doors that led out into the garden; it was the easiest way to come and go from the house without being seen—I used it all the time."

He'd used it the night before, in fact, to steal out for an illicit excursion to the river with the son of a local poacher. He'd left the conservatory door carefully jammed, to ensure an inconspicuous return at dawn, and when he came back in the soft gray light, wet to the knees, his pockets full of interesting stones and dead crayfish, a live baby rabbit tucked in his shirt, the door had seemed just as he'd left it. A careful look round in case the gardeners should be stirring early, and he had slipped inside, heart thumping with excitement.

"It was so quiet," he said, and saw it in memory, the glass panes of the ceiling beginning to glow but the huge room below still slumbering. Everything was gray and shadowed, dreamlike.

"It wasn't yet full day. No noise from the house proper, all the ferns and vines and trees still—and yet, you know the way plants seem to breathe? They were doing that. I didn't see him—see the body—just at first. My foot struck the gun; it was lying just inside the door, and went spinning off with a terrible clatter."

He'd stood transfixed, then ducked hastily behind a row of potted acacias, in case someone should have heard the racket. Apparently no one had, though, and he peeped cautiously out from his refuge.

"He was—he was lying under the peach tree. A ripe peach had fallen and smashed on the stone floor beside him; I could smell it."

Smelt it, rich and sweet, above the jungle damp of the plants, mingled with the richer stink of blood and bowels. That was his first exposure to the smell of death; it had never troubled him on battlefields, but he could not eat peaches.

"How far ...? The, um, the ... gun?" Percy spoke with the greatest delicacy. Grey squeezed his fingers to show that he appreciated it.

"No, he couldn't have dropped it. He lay twenty feet away, at least, with a bench and several big pot-plants between."

He'd known at once that it was his father. The duke was wearing his favorite old jacket, a shabby thing of checkered wool, not fit for anything beyond puttering.

"I knew from the first glimpse that he was dead," he said, staring up into the white void above. "But I ran to him."

There was no way in which to describe his feelings, because he hadn't had any. The world had simply ceased in that moment, and with it, all his knowledge of how things were done. He simply could not see how life might continue. The first lesson of adult life was that it, horribly, did.

"He'd been shot in the heart, though I couldn't see that, only a pool of blood on the floor under him. His face was all right, though." His own voice seemed remote. "I hadn't time to look further. The door into the house opened just then."

Sheer instinct, rather than thought, had propelled him back behind the acacias, and he had crouched there, frozen like the rabbits he had hunted in the night.

"It was my mother," he said.

She'd been in her wrapper, not yet dressed for the day, and her hair hanging over her shoulder in a thick plait. He'd seen the first light from the glass panes overhead strike her, glowing from the dark-blond plait, showing up her wary face.

"Gerry?" she'd said, voice low.

The baby rabbit in John's shirt had stirred then, roused by his own immobility. He was too shocked to do anything about it, too frightened to call out to the duchess.

She looked about her, and called once more, "Gerry?" Then she saw him, and what dim color the growing light had lent her vanished in an instant.

"She went to him, of course—fell on her knees beside him, touched him, called his name, but in a sort of desperate whisper."

"She expected to find him there," Percy said, intent. "And she was shocked to find him dead—but ... not surprised, perhaps?"

"Very astute of you." Grey rubbed at his ribs, feeling in memory the scratch of the rabbit's sharp claws, a pain ignored. "No. She wasn't surprised. I was."

The duchess had remained for a few moments crouched over her husband's body, rocking to and fro in an agony of silent grief. Then she had sat back on her heels, arms wrapped about herself, her white face set like stone, and tearless.

The rabbit's scrabbling at his belly drew blood, and he clenched his teeth against a hiss of pain. Fumbling madly and silently, he pulled the tail of his shirt free and the little thing tumbled to the stone floor of the conservatory, where it stood frozen for an instant, then shot out of the acacias, toward the outer door.

The duchess recoiled from the sudden movement, hand clamped across her mouth. Then she saw the rabbit, quivering in a small puddle of early light, and her shoulders shook.

"Oh, God," she said, still quietly. "Oh, dear God."

She'd stood up then, the skirt of her wrapper stained with blood, and walked across the conservatory. Keeping her distance from the rabbit, she pushed the door ajar with one outstretched arm, then stepped back and stood watching, apparently deeply absorbed, as the rabbit stayed for a long, nose-twitching second before bolting for freedom.

"I might have come out then," Grey said, and drew a deep breath. "But just then, she saw the gun. I hadn't known it was a gun myself—only that my foot had struck something—but when she picked it up, I saw it was a pistol. A dueling gun, one of my father's. He'd a pair of them, chased silver—very beautiful."

His father had let him shoot with one, once. Seeing the silver of the barrel glint as his mother lifted it, he'd felt the shock of recoil in his arm, heard the sharp bang, and his empty stomach had risen up, choking him with bile.

"She stood there for a moment, just staring at it. Then her face ... changed. She looked at my father's body, at the gun, and—I knew she'd made a decision of some kind."

She had crossed the floor like a sleepwalker, stooped, and put the pistol in her husband's hand. She'd laid a hand, very lightly, on his head and stroked his hair. Then rose swiftly and walked quickly away into the house, closing the door gently behind her.

John had stood up, light-headed from the sudden movement, and staggered to the outer door. He'd shoved it open and, leaving it hanging ajar, ran through the garden and out the gate, across the back fields—running without thought or destination, only running, until he tripped and fell.

"There was a hayrick near. I crawled to it, and burrowed in. After a bit, I went to sleep."

"Hoping that it wouldn't be real when you woke," Percy said softly. Somewhere in the telling, Percy had gathered him into his arms, and held him now, close against his body. His head lay in the hollow of Percy's shoulder, and the curly hairs of Percy's chest brushed soft against his lips when he spoke.

"It was, though. The farmer found me near sunset; I'd slept nearly the day through, and everyone was in a panic, looking for me."

Percy's hand smoothed the hair away from John's face, gentle.

"Your mother likely thought whoever'd killed your father had got you, too."

"Yes, she did." For the first time in the telling, a lump came into his throat, recalling his mother's face when she'd seen him, filthy, trailing hay and mud across the Turkey carpet in her boudoir. "That's—the only time she cried."

Percy's arm tightened round his shoulders. He could hear Percy's heart, a muffled, steady thump beneath his ear.

"And you?" Percy said at last, very quietly. "Did you weep for your father?"

"I never did," he said, and closed his eyes.

Chapter 19



Pictures at an Exhibition

Grey had one precious day of leave, following the wedding. He was greatly tempted to spend it in bed with Percy. But it was his only chance to go and have a look at Gilbert Rigby, erstwhile soldier and suitor of widows, presently guardian to London's foundlings. And there was the minor consideration that flesh had its limits.

He and Percy had reached them twice more, waking in the night in a musky tangle of limbs. The memory of warm, wet mouths in the darkness and the taste of wine and wood morels had been enough to make him slide out of bed at dawn when he saw Percy, naked, dousing his face with water at the basin, and seize him from behind.

He would have felt guilt at his own rough manners, had Percy not made it clear as day that such usage suited him.

"Don't worry," Percy had whispered, when he had tried to say something afterward—apologize, perhaps. Percy's face was buried in his shoulder, but he felt the smile against his skin. "You'll have your full share."

He hadn't realized what *that* meant, but it became clear soon enough; such slow and tender use as Percy put him to was nonetheless thorough—and lasted a very long time. It brought him to the edge again, held him trembling there, gasping and whimpering, and finally dropped him over the side of a sheer precipice he had never suspected was there. He came to himself bathed in sweat and so shattered that his eyes barely focused, only to find that Percy still held him, was still inside him. He had made some small sound, and Percy laughed.

Percy was laughing now, and the sound of it, deep and infectious, made him hard on the instant, blood rushing through him like a spring tide, rich with salt, surging through and stinging his abraded flesh.

"Look at that!"

He turned to see where Percy was pointing, and saw a small pug dog trotting through the crowd, its tail curled up tight as a spring and a grin on its face. Everyone who saw it was grinning, too; the animal was wearing a black velvet jacket with silver buttons and yellow silk butterflies embroidered round the edge, a small brimmed hat tied to its head with a string beneath its chin.

The dog was attracting a great deal more attention than the portraits on display. They were in the inner court of the Foundling Hospital, where an artists' exhibition to raise funds for support of that institution was in progress. No better opportunity, Grey had thought, for laying eyes on Doctor Rigby, while still enjoying Percy's company.

The women, in particular, were in ecstasies over the pug, and from their remarks, Grey gathered that the pug's owner, a tall, lean man with a dignified air, was indeed the director himself. Rigby was evidently conducting a sort of royal progress, moving slowly through the crowd, greeting people and pausing to chat for a moment.

Rigby would reach them within a few minutes, Grey saw, and so turned to examine the pictures at hand. The Dilettante Society had organized an ongoing exhibition, making this the first public art gallery in London. The painters of the society had lent a number of their own canvases, as did some of the richer governors and noble patrons of the Foundling Hospital. Among the modern paintings by Reynolds, Hogarth, Casali, and Rybrack was a rarity—a portrait from an earlier century.

"Look at that," he said, nudging Percy.

It was the famous Larkin portrait of George Villiers, first Duke of Buckingham. The duke, slender as a sylph in white silk hose, and bejeweled like a dagger hilt, gave them back a grin of slightly frenetic gaiety, below a pair of knowing eyes.

After a long moment, Percy turned to him, with a nod at the portrait.

"What do you think?"

"No doubt about it, I should say."

They looked at the portrait together, standing quite close; he could feel the warmth of Percy's arm brushing his.

"Odd, how it shows on some men, but others—" Percy shook his head, then glanced at Grey with a smile. "Not you, John."

"Nor you."

In fact, most of the men he had encountered who shared their "abominable perversion" gave not the slightest indication of their appetites in the outward person. Those few who did tended to be of the very effeminate, doe-eyed sort; pretty in youth, but they aged badly.

He cast a look back, as they moved on. George Villiers had not had the opportunity to age, badly or no. Villiers had been not only a nobleman but the favorite of a king, and as such, immune to prosecution. He had been killed by a naval officer at the age of thirty-six—not because of his private behavior, which was notorious, but because of his military incompetence. Grey wondered what Michael Bates would have thought of that, and for a fraction of an instant, wished the captain there.

But Dr. Rigby was approaching them now, cordiality stamped upon his saturnine features.

"Good day, gentlemen!" the doctor said, coming up to them. "You are enjoying the exhibition, I trust? It is so kind of you; we appreciate your support more than I can say."

"Your servant, sir." Grey bowed, unable to keep from returning Rigby's smile, which seemed to hold a genuine warmth and sincerity, for all he had doubtless been employing it without respite for the last hour.

"We are honored to be able to be of any help," Percy said, with a depth of feeling that surprised Grey a little. He bowed, too, and held out his knuckles to the pug, to be sniffed. "Your servant, sir," he said gravely to the dog.

Rigby laughed.

"Thank the gentleman, Hercules," he said, whereupon the pug put forth one foot and executed a gracious bow, then licked Percy's hand, wagging enthusiastically.

Rigby had given no indication whatever that he recognized Grey. For his own part, Grey might or might not have recognized the former Captain Rigby in the hospital's director; he had met Rigby a few times at his parents' house, but then Rigby had always been in uniform, and with no attention to spare for a ten-year-old boy.

"I am directed to give you my mother's compliments, sir," he said to Rigby. "The Dowager Countess of Melton?"

Rigby frowned as though unable to place the name, and Grey swiftly added, "Though I believe you knew her as the Duchess of Pardloe."

Rigby's face went comically blank for a moment, then he recovered himself, and seized Grey by the hand.

"My dear sir!" he exclaimed, pumping the hand. "My apologies! I should have known you at once—you resemble your father very strikingly, now that I realize.... But of course it is many years since I knew him. Such a sad loss ..." The doctor was stumbling, flushing with embarrassment. "I mean ... I do not wish to recall you to such

a ... How is your dear mother?"

"Very well," Grey said, smiling. "Though in fact, she is no longer Countess of Melton, either. She was married yesterday, to Sir George Stanley."

Rigby appeared genuinely astonished by the news; either he had had no idea, or he was a splendid actor.

"You must offer her my heartiest congratulations," he said, pressing Grey's hand warmly. "Do you know, I once asked her to marry *me*?" "Really?"

"Oh, yes." Rigby laughed, the wrinkles of his face drawing up in such a way as to destroy the illusion of dignity. "She very wisely refused me, saying that she thought I was quite unfit for marriage to anyone."

Grey coughed.

"Ah ... I am afraid my mother is sometimes—"

"Oh, she was entirely right," the doctor assured him. "She correctly perceived—some time before I did—that I am a natural bachelor, and much too fond of my own company and habits to make the adjustments required by marriage. But perhaps you are married yourself, sir?"

Grey was taken entirely unaware by the wash of heat that flooded his face at the question.

"Ah ... no, sir. I am afraid not." He glanced unobtrusively aside for Percy, but his stepbrother had gone to one of the windows that overlooked the grounds and was watching something outside. "Nor is my stepbrother," he added, nodding at Percy. "General Stanley's son, Perc—Percival Wainwright."

"Time enough, sir, time enough." Rigby smiled indulgently, then became aware of the hovering presence of several ladies, awaiting their turn to be introduced to Hercules, who was wagging the entire rear half of his body and panting at them in friendly fashion.

"I must go," the doctor said, clasping his hand once more. "How pleased I am to have met you, Lord John—it is Lord John, is it not, and your brother's name is Harold? Yes, just so, I thought I remembered. Allow me to say that while your mother was entirely correct in her refusal of me, I should have taken the greatest pride in being your stepfather, and I offer my most sincere congratulations to Sir George in his entering that office."

His departure left Grey with the feeling of one who has had a warm blanket removed and finds the cool air surprising. He felt somewhat disconcerted, but oddly touched by the meeting, and strolled over to join Percy by the window.

There were a number of children on the open ground, bundled in coats and shawls against the chill, running about in some sort of game under the eyes of a pair of nurses.

"Do you like children, particularly?" he inquired, surprised at seeing Percy's attention fixed on them.

"No, not particularly." Stirred from his reverie, Percy turned and smiled at him, his face touched with ruefulness. "I was only wondering what their life is like here." He glanced around them, at the high walls of brick and gray stone. The place was clean, and certainly not without elegance, but "homely" was not the adjective one would choose to describe it.

"Better than it would have been otherwise, I suppose." Some of the foundlings were orphans, others given up by mothers who could not feed them.

"Is it?" Percy gave him a crooked smile. "My mother tried to have me admitted here, when it opened. But I was much too old—they didn't take children older than two."

Grey stared at him, aghast.

"Oh, God," he said softly. "Perseverance, my dear."

"It's all right," Percy said, his smile becoming better. "I didn't hold it against her. My father had died the year before, and she was desperate. But tell me, what did you make of the good doctor?" He nodded at Rigby, now some distance down the gallery, his cordiality as indefatigable as Hercules's wagging tail.

Grey would have said more, but Percy was plainly disinclined to pursue the subject of his early life, so Grey obliged with his impressions of Doctor Rigby.

"I cannot think he has anything to do with the matter," he concluded. "He was plainly taken completely unaware by my appearance, and unless he is most remarkably devious, he had no inkling of my mother's marriage."

A fresh inrush of people caught them up at this point, preventing private conversation, and they made their way slowly along the gallery, carried along with the crowd into a special room where the permanent exhibition of William Hogarth's paintings were kept—Hogarth being one of the principal benefactors of the hospital—and out again, each alone with his thoughts.

They came back again along the main gallery, but Doctor Rigby and

Hercules had disappeared.

"Do you ever wish—" Percy began, and then stopped, a small frown visible between his brows. Thick, silky brows, the sable of a painter's brush; Grey's thumb itched with the urge to smooth them.

"Do I ever wish?" he prompted, and smiled. "Many things." He let a hint of such things as he wished show in his voice, and Percy smiled back, though the frown did not disappear altogether.

"Do you ever wish that you were ... not as you are?"

The question took him by surprise—and yet he was somewhat more surprised to realize that he did not need to think about the answer.

"No," he said. He hesitated for a moment, but Percy's asking of the question was enough. "You do?"

Percy glanced back at the portrait of Villiers, then looked down, dark lashes hiding his eyes.

"Sometimes. You must admit—it would make some things less difficult."

Grey glanced thoughtfully at a nearby couple, evidently courting; the young woman was flirting expertly over her fan, giggling as her swain made faces, imitating the stuffed-frog expression of one portrait's subject.

"Perhaps. And yet it depends, I think, much more upon one's position in life. Were I my father's heir, for instance, I should feel the pressure of an obligation to marry and reproduce, and should likely consent. As it is, my brother has met his obligations in that regard nobly, and thus it is a matter of indifference whether I should ever wed."

He shrugged, dismissing the matter, but Percy was not willing yet to let it go.

"You may be indifferent," he said, with a sideways smile. "The women are not."

Grey lifted one shoulder briefly.

"There is the issue of consent. They will scarce abduct me and wed me by force."

"Oh, Lady Joffrey would see it done, I assure you." Percy rolled his eyes expressively. He had met Lucinda Joffrey at Lady Jonas's salon and been impressed by her force of character, which was considerable. "Never turn your back upon her; she will have you knocked on the head and carried out in a roll of carpet, only to wake in Gretna Green as a new husband!"

Grey laughed at that, but conceded the point.

"She would. You are in as much danger as I, though, surely—Lady Joffrey has eight cousins and nieces to marry off!" Then he caught a glimpse of the wry twist to Percy's mouth, and realized what he had meant by making some things less difficult.

"Oh, she has had a stab at you already, has she?" he asked, suppressing a smile. "Which one did she throw at you?"

"Melisande Roberts," said Percy, his mouth drawing down in an expression of mild distaste.

"Oh, Melly?" Grey glanced down, hiding a smile. He had known Melisande all his life; they had played together as children. "Well, she is good-tempered. And kindness itself. And she has a modest income."

"She is the size of a hogshead of ale, and approximately the same shape!"

"True," Grey allowed. "And yet—it would make no difference to you, surely, if she were a great beauty?"

Percy, who had been looking sulky, gave a lopsided smile at this.

"Well ... no. Not in terms of ... no. But I shouldn't want to go about with a plain woman on my arm, as though I could get no better!"

"Shall I consider myself flattered," Grey inquired, "that you consent to be seen in public with me, then?"

Percy glanced at him and uttered a short laugh.

"Oh, you would be a catch, my dear, were you bankrupt and common as dirt—or as I am."

"I am exceeding flattered," Grey said politely, and took Percy's arm, squeezing until his fingers sank past cloth and flesh and touched bone. "Shall we go?"

Percy caught breath, but nodded, and they went out, walking in a silence of unshared thoughts down High Holbourn Street. They had planned to see Mecklin's performance as Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* and have supper at the Beefsteak; Grey was anticipating the evening—and the night to come thereafter—but Percy's thoughts were evidently still focused on their conversation.

"Do you think it true," he said suddenly, in a low voice, "that we are damned?"

Grey was not of a theosophical turn of mind, nor yet much concerned about the stated tenets of religion. He had many times heard his father's uncensored opinions of an earlier sovereign, Henry, and the effects of that worthy's sexual itch and dynastic ambitions upon the Church of Rome.

Yet Percy's eyes were deep and troubled; Grey would ease that

trouble, if he could.

"I do not," he said, as lightly as possible. "Men are made in God's image, or so I am told. Likewise that we differ from the animals in having reason. Reason, therefore, must plainly be a characteristic of the Almighty, *quod erat demonstrandum*. Is it reasonable, then, to create men whose very nature—clearly constructed and defined by yourself—is inimical to your own laws and must lead inevitably to destruction? Whatever would be the point of that? Does it not strike you as a most capricious notion—to say nothing of being wasteful?"

Plainly, the notion of a reasonable God—let alone a thrifty one—had not struck Percy before. He laughed, his face lightening, and they spoke no more of the matter then.



Percy did return to the matter a few days later, though. No doubt it was a matter of Percy's own upbringing in a religious milieu, Grey reflected. Or perhaps it was only that Percy had never been with a man willing to discuss philosophy in bed. Grey hadn't, himself, but found the novelty mildly diverting.

They had left the barracks separately and met in Percy's rooms for a few stolen hours. Where, after the initial delights of the flesh had been tasted, Grey found himself with his head pillowed on Percy's stomach, being read to from a collection of legal opinions, published a year or two previous.

"If any crime deserve to be punished in a more exemplary manner, this does. Other crimes are prejudicial to society; but this strikes at the being thereof: it being seldom known that a person who has been guilty of abusing his generative faculty so unnaturally has afterwards a proper regard for women. For that indifference to women, so remarkable in men of this depraved appetite, it may fairly be concluded that they are cursed with insensibility to the most ecstatic pleasure which human nature is in the present state capable of enjoying. It seems a very just punishment that such wretches should be deprived of all tastes for an enjoyment upon which they did not set a proper value; and the continuation of an impious disposition, which then might have been transmitted to their children, if they had any, may be thereby prevented."

"So," Grey remarked, "we must be exterminated, because our pleasures are insufficiently ecstatic?"

Percy's brow relaxed a bit, and he closed the book.

"And lest we pass on this deplorable lack to our children—which we are hardly likely to have, under the circumstances."

"Well, as to that—I know more than one gentleman who seeks no pleasure in his wife's bed, but goes there in the course of duty nonetheless."

"Yes, that's true." Percy still frowned, though with thoughtfulness, rather than unease. "Do you think it's actually different? Between a man and a woman? Not merely in mechanical terms, I mean, but in terms of feeling?"

Grey had seen enough of marriages arranged among the nobility and the wealthy as to know that the emotions and mutual attraction of the persons involved were usually considered irrelevant, if indeed they were considered at all. Whereas such ongoing relations as he had from time to time contracted himself involved nothing else, being quite free of the requirements of society. Still, he considered the matter, enjoying the peaceful rise and fall of Percy's breathing beneath his cheek.

"I think a gentleman conducts his affairs with kindness and with honor," he said, at last. "That being so, if the recipient is a woman or a man—does it matter so much?"

Percy gave a short laugh.

"Kindness and honor? That's all well—but what of love?"

Grey valued love—and feared it—too greatly to make idle protestations.

"You cannot compel love," he said finally, "nor summon it at will. Still less," he added ruefully, "can you dismiss it." He sat up then, and looked at Percy, who was looking down, tracing patterns on the counterpane with a fingertip. "I think you are not in love with me, though, are you?"

Percy smiled a little, not looking up. Not disagreeing, either. "Cannot dismiss it," he echoed. "Who was he? Or is he?"

"Is." Grey felt a sudden jolt of the heart at the speaking of that single word. Something at once joyful and terrible; the admission was irrevocable.

Percy was looking up at him now, brown eyes bright with interest.

"It is—I mean, he—you need not worry. There is no possibility of

anything between us," Grey blurted, and bit his tongue to keep back the sudden impulse to tell everything, only for the momentary ecstasy of speaking of Jamie Fraser. He was wiser than that, though, and kept the words bottled tight in his throat.

"Oh. He's not ...?" Percy's gaze flicked momentarily over Grey's nakedness, then returned to his face.

"No."

It was late in the day; light skimmed across the room from the high attic windows, striking the dark burnished mass of Percy's curling hair, painting the lines of his face in chiaroscuro, but leaving his body in the dimness of shadow.

"Is friendship and sincere liking not enough for you?" Grey was careful to avoid any tone of pettishness or accusation, making the question merely one of honest inquiry. Percy heard this, and smiled, lopsidedly, but with answering honesty.

"No." He stretched out a hand and ran it up Grey's bare arm, over the curve of his shoulder, and down the slope of his breast, where he spread his palm flat over the nipple—and took a sudden grip of the flesh there, fingers digging into the muscle.

"Add that, though ..." he said softly, "and I think it will suffice."



They saw little of each other during the days, Grey being busy with the increasingly frantic preparations for departure, and Percy consumed by the rigors of his own training and the needs of the four companies under his command. Still, in the evenings, they could go about quite openly together in public, as any two men who happened to be particular friends might do—to supper, to a play, or a gaming club. And if they left such venues together, as well, it caused no comment.

No one at Jermyn Street would question Grey's occasional absence at night, for he often slept in the barracks or at the Beefsteak, if he had been kept late on regimental business or out with friends. Still, to be gone every night would cause notice, and so the nights they spent together in Percy's rooms were doubly precious—for their scarcity, and for the realization that they were coming to an end.

"We must be circumspect in the extreme," Grey said. "On campaign. There is very little privacy."

"Of course," Percy said, though given what he was doing at the time, Grey thought he was not paying particular attention. His fingers tightened in Percy's hair, but he did not make him stop. Time enough to repeat the warning—and he was no more eager than Percy to contemplate the inevitable interruption of their intimacy.

An intimacy of more than body—though God knew, that was sufficiently intimate.

Percy had taken him at his offer on their first night, again the next morning, and had used him with the greatest gentleness—a gentleness that unnerved him, even as it brought him nearly to tears.

He had not made that particular offer again, disturbed as much by the experience as he had been by the long-ago rape, though in a very different—and admittedly more pleasant—way. Percy never pressed him, never asked; only made it clear that should Grey wish it ... And perhaps he would, again. But not yet.

The unexpected intimacy of mind between them was as intoxicating—and occasionally as unsettling—as that of the flesh.

Percy had not referred directly to the story Grey had told him regarding the duke's murder since the night they had first lain together. He knew his friend must be thinking of it, though, and was therefore not surprised when Percy mentioned the matter a few days later. Not pleased—he did not precisely regret telling Percy the truth, but was surprised at himself for having done so after keeping the secret for so long, and felt a sort of lurking unease at the secret he had guarded for so long being now shared by another—but not surprised.

"But what happened afterward?" Percy demanded. "What did you do? Did you not tell anyone? Your mother?"

Grey felt a flash of annoyance, but recognized in time that the cause of it was not Percy's question but the memory of his own helplessness.

"I was twelve years old," he said, and Percy glanced at him sharply and drew back a little, sensing the edge in his voice, despite its calm. "I said nothing."

The gardener had found the duke's body, later in the morning. A hastily convened coroner's jury had found a verdict of death while the balance of mind was disturbed, and two days afterward Grey had been sent north, to stay with distant cousins of his mother's, in Aberdeen. The duchess, with a prudence he did not appreciate until years later, had left, too, to live in France for several years.

"Could she not have taken you with her?" Percy asked, echoing Grey's own anguished—but unspoken—question at the time.

"I believe," he said carefully, "she considered that there might be some risk to her own life."

He believed—though very much *ex post facto*—that she had in fact courted such risk.

"Courted it?" Percy echoed in surprise. "Whatever do you mean by that?"

Grey sighed, rubbing two fingers between his brows. There was an unexpected relief, and even pleasure, in the intimacy of talking, finally, about all this—but this was balanced by the equally unexpected distress of reliving those events.

"It's a gray place, Aberdeen." Grey was sitting up in bed, arms round his knees, watching the last of the night evaporate from the roofs of the city. "Stone. Rain. And Scots. The bloody Scots." He shook his head in recollection, the sound of their talk like the rumble of carriage wheels on gravel.

"I didn't hear much. Scandals in London ..." He shrugged. "Not of interest in Aberdeen. And I imagine that was the point; to shield me from the talk. My mother's cousins were kind enough, but very ... remote. Still, I overheard a few things."

The duchess—or the countess, as she had taken to styling herself—had apparently been very visible in France, to the murmurous disapproval of her Scottish Lowland relations. Not young, she was still a very handsome woman, and rich.

"There were rumors that she had to do with some of the French Jacobites. And if there is one thing of which I am certain, it is that my mother harbored—and harbors—no sympathy whatever for that cause."

"You think she was looking for the man who killed your father."

Grey nodded, still looking out the window, seeing not the lightening sky above London but the gray rain clouds of Aberdeen.

"I don't know if she found him," he said softly. "I convinced myself after a time that she had. Had killed him in turn—or in some other way contrived his destruction."

Percy raised an incredulous eyebrow.

"You think—or thought—that your mother had killed him?"

"You think women are not capable of such things?" Grey didn't quite laugh, but turned his head so that Percy could see the half smile on his face.

"Not generally, no. My mother could certainly not ..." Percy trailed off, frowning, evidently trying to visualize Benedicta Grey in the act

of murder. "How? Poison?"

"I don't know. She's rather direct, my mother. Much more likely a stab to the heart. But in fact, I don't suppose she ever found the man—if indeed she was searching for him. It was just ... something I told myself she was doing." He shrugged, dismissing the memory. "What happened to *your* father?" he asked curiously.

Percy shook his head, but accepted the change of subject, an expression of wry humor on his face.

"Believe it or not, he was run over by a mail coach."

"Ass!"

"No, I mean it, he was." Percy shrugged, helpless. "He was standing in front of a public house in Cheltenham, preaching at the top of his lungs and quite oblivious to his surroundings. We heard the coach coming—"

"You were there?"

"Yes, of course. He'd take me along, to give out tracts or pass the hat when he preached in public. Anyway, I pulled at his coat—I could see the coach then, and how fast it was coming—and he cuffed me away, absently, you know, like one would brush away a fly, too absorbed in his vision of heaven to notice anything on earth. He stepped forward, to get away from me. Then it was on us and I jumped back, out of the way. And ... he didn't."

"I'm sorry," Grey said.

Percy glanced at him, mouth half turned up.

"I wasn't. Self-righteous, heavy-handed bastard. My mother wasn't sorry, either, though his death made it very hard for her." He flipped a hand, indicating that he wished to waste no more conversation on the subject. "Going back to your much more sincerely lamented father—I have been thinking about what you told me. Do you—do you mind?"

"No," Grey said cautiously. "What have you been thinking?"

Percy cleared his throat. "I'll tell you, but since you mentioned the, um, inquest. You are quite, quite positive that your father did not ... uhh ..."

"No, he didn't, and yes, I am sure." Grey heard the edge in his own voice and made a small gesture of apology. "Sorry. I ... haven't spoken of it before. It's—"

"Raw," Percy said softly. Grey glanced up and saw such a warmth of understanding in Percy's eyes that he was obliged to look away, his own eyes stinging. "Yes," he said. Like a fresh-cut onion.

Percy squeezed his leg comfortingly, but said no more of Grey's feelings, returning to his line of thought.

"Well, then. If—I mean, *since* that is the case, we know something important, do we not?"

"What?"

"The murderer himself didn't seek to disguise the death as suicide. Your mother did that. Do you know why, by the way? I suppose you never asked her."

Grey managed a wry smile at that.

"Could you have asked your mother such a thing?"

Percy frowned, seeming to consider the question, but Grey didn't wait for an answer.

"No. I've never spoken to my mother regarding the matter. Nor Hal."

One of Percy's smooth dark brows rose high.

"Really. You mean—neither of them knows that *you* know that your father's death was not a suicide?"

"I suppose they don't." It occurred to him for the first time, with a small sense of shock, to wonder whether Hal knew the truth of their father's death. He had always supposed that he must, that their mother had told Hal the truth—and resented the thought that she had but had not told him, owing to his youth. But what if she hadn't told Hal, either?

That thought was too much to deal with at the moment. He pushed it away, returning to Percy's question.

"I'm reasonably sure why she did it. She feared some danger—whether to herself, Hal, or even me—and that fear must have been exigent, since she preferred to allow my father's name to be disgraced rather than risk it."

Percy caught the underlying note of bitterness in this.

"Well, she *is* your mother," he said mildly. "A woman might be excused for valuing her sons' lives above their father's honor, I suppose. The point I was getting at, though, is this: the murderer didn't kill your father in order to deflect suspicion from himself by making your father appear to be a traitor. So why *did* he do it?"

He looked at Grey, expectant.

"To keep my father from revealing the murderer's own identity as a Jacobite traitor," Grey said, and shrugged. "Or so I have always supposed. Why else?"

"So would I." Percy leaned forward a little, intent. "And whoever did it is also presumably the same person who took your father's journal, do you not think?"

"Yes," Grey said slowly. "I imagine so. I didn't know at the time that the journal had been taken, of course ..." And not knowing, had never taken that into account, during all those long gray hours of brooding, alone in Aberdeen. "You think—oh, Jesus." His mind skipped the next obvious question—might the duke have written of his suspicions in his journal—and darted to the point Percy had been coming to.

"He *wasn't* in the habit of writing in his journal in the conservatory, then?" Percy was reading the progress of Grey's thoughts across his face, his own face alight with cautious excitement.

"No, never." Grey took a moment to breathe. "The conservatory wasn't lighted, save for parties. He always wrote in his journal in the library, before retiring for the evening—and put the journal back into the bookcase there. He wrote on campaign, of course—but otherwise, no. I never saw him write in his journal anywhere else."

Which meant two things: whoever had shot his father had known him well enough to be aware that he kept a journal and where it was —and whoever had done it was sufficiently well-known to the household that he had been able to enter the library and abstract the journal.

"Do you think he took it ... before?" Percy asked. "Might that be why, do you think? That the murderer read the journal, saw that he was exposed—or about to be—and thus ..."

Grey rubbed a hand over his face, the bristles of his sprouting beard rasping his palm, but shook his head.

"Even assuming that my father was foolish enough to write down such suspicions in plain language—and I assure you he was not—how could someone have read it? No one looked at his journals—not even my mother; she teased him about them—and he didn't leave them lying about."

Restless, he got out of bed and stood by the window, trying to remember. He was trying to reconstruct in his mind the library at their country house. They called it "the library" more by way of jest than anything else; it was a tiny, book-lined closet, lacking even a hearth, with barely room for a chair and a small writing desk. Not the sort of room in which his father would have entertained visitors.

"I do agree that it's more likely that the man took the journal after

the murder." Percy rubbed absently at his shoulders, cold in spite of his woolen banyan. "A visitor—coming to leave his condolences? Might he not have found opportunity to abstract it then?"

Grey grappled with the notion. He was unwilling to relive the horrible days following his father's death, but obliged perforce to recall them. The quiet, hurried arrangements, the low-voiced conversations, always suspended when he came in sight.

There *had* been a few visitors, friends who came to support the duchess in her grief, and a few of Hal's particular friends—Harry, Harry Quarry had come, he recalled that. Who else? Robert Walpole, of course. He remembered the First Lord, gray-faced and ponderous, coming slowly up the walk, leaning on his secretary for support, the shadow of his own approaching death clear upon his face.

He closed his eyes, fingers pressed against the lids, trying to think. Faces flitted past, some with names, some strangers, all fractured by remembered shock. Bar Harry and Walpole, the only people he could recall with any clarity from that dreadful week were—

He dropped his hand, opening his eyes.

"It might not have been a visitor," he said slowly.

Percy blinked, and pursed his lips.

"A servant?" he said, shocked at the idea. "Oh, no."

Grey felt a coldness at the heart at the thought himself. The servants had all been with his parents for years, were trusted implicitly. To consider that one of them, someone who had shared the family's house, the intimacies of its daily life, might all the while ...

He shook himself, dismissing the idea.

"I can't think anymore," he said. "I can't." Tiredness pressed on his shoulders, and his neck ached with the weight of recalled sorrow and anger. His eyes were burning, and he leaned his forehead against the frozen windowpane, welcoming the cold pressure of it on his face. Dawn was coming up in the east; the ice-blurred glass glowed with a faint yellow light.

There was a rustle of bedclothes, and he felt Percy's hands, warm on his shoulders. He resisted for a moment, but then let Percy pull him away from the window, hold him close, body to body.

"Don't be sorry that you told me." Percy spoke quietly in his ear. "Please."

"No," he murmured, not sure whether he was sorry or not. At the moment, he wished he had kept silent, only because to speak of it was to be forced to think of it again. He'd kept the secret buried for so long—he hadn't realized that he had kept it buried in his own flesh, as well as his mind. His joints ached as though he was being slowly pulled apart.

"You're cold; you'll make yourself ill. Come to bed."

He suffered Percy to put him to bed and draw the blankets up under his chin. He closed his eyes obediently when told to, and listened to the sounds of Percy stirring up the fire, adding wood, using the pot. Then opened them again when he heard Percy break the ice in the ewer and splash water into the tin he used to heat his shaving water.

"Where are you going?" he demanded. Percy turned from the hearth and smiled at him, hair standing on end, his face darkly rakish with its bristling beard.

"Some of us must work for a living, my dear," he said. "And I have it on good authority that I shall be cashiered and broken—if not actually strung up by the thumbs and flogged—should I not appear promptly on the square with my companies in good order by nine of the clock."

"That's right—am I not inspecting your companies at nine o'clock?" Grey sat up, but Percy waved him back into the pillows.

"Given that the bells have just rung half six, and that *you* have nothing to do save shave, dress, and stroll in a leisurely fashion to the parade ground, I think you may take your ease for a bit." Percy picked up his shaving mug and bent to peer into the tiny square of his looking glass, mouth half open in concentration as he applied the lather.

Grey lay slowly back, and watched him go about the business of shaving and dressing, neat and quick. A little of Percy's warmth remained in the bedclothes; it thawed him, slowly, and he felt a great lassitude steal over him. His mind felt soggy, and tender, like a bruised fruit.

The room was still dark, dawn some way off. He could see Percy's breath as he bent to pull on his boots, fastened the hooks of his coat.

Wig in place, Percy paused by the bedside, looking down at him.

"Do you think she knew? Who it was?"

"I'm sure she did not," Grey said, with what firmness he could muster.

Percy nodded and bending, kissed him on the forehead.

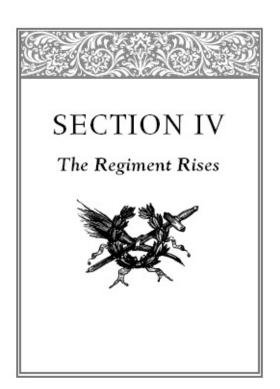
"Try to sleep," he said. "The bells will wake you."

He left, closing the door gently behind him.

The warmth now enclosed Grey in a snug pocket, though the end of

his nose was as cold as if he still pressed it against the windowpane. He was heavy-limbed, blanketed with the fatigue of a long day and a sleepless night—but he knew he would not sleep, bells or no.

He was going to have to talk to Jamie Fraser again.



Chapter 20



Ye Jacobites by Name

Helwater The Lake District

He spent as little time as politeness required with the Dunsanys, before discovering that he had left something he required in his saddlebag.

"No, no—I'll fetch it. Won't take a moment." He stopped Lady Dunsany, her hand on the bell rope, and was out of the library before she could protest.

His heart beat faster as he approached the stable, but for once, it had little to do with the physical presence of Jamie Fraser.

Dinner had been served; the stable was filled with the peaceful sounds of chewing and the smell of fresh-broken hay. One or two of the horses lifted a head to look at him, wisps of hay straggling from the champing jaws, but for the most part, they ignored him, noses firmly planted in the mangers.

Fraser was at the far end of the stable, mucking out. The huge door there had been slid aside, and he was silhouetted against the pale light of the fading spring sky. He must have heard Grey's footsteps on the brick floor, but didn't break the rhythm of his work.

He stopped, though, and straightened when Grey came up to him. It was cold in the stable, but there was a sheen of moisture across his jaw, and the linen shirt clung to his shoulders. He smelled of clean sweat.

"Leaks," Grey said abruptly. "You said 'leaks.' "

Fraser rested the manure fork on its tines, wiped his face with a sleeve, and regarded him quizzically.

"I dinna recall having done so, Major, but I suppose it's possible—I do ken the word."

"When you spoke of the Stuart court at our last meeting," Grey amplified. "You said, and I quote, 'The Stuart court leaks like a sieve.' I am convinced that you understand the niceties of English grammar sufficiently as to use the present tense correctly, Mr. Fraser."

Fraser raised one thick red brow, though no expression of concern

showed on his face. Grey sighed.

"It leaks like a sieve," he repeated. "How do you know that it does, unless you are presently in contact with someone there?"

Fraser rubbed a finger under his nose, regarding him, then turned back to his work, shaking his head.

"Your brain's like to burst, Major, and ye dinna give over thinking so much," he said, not unkindly. He shoved the pitchfork under a mound of manure-matted straw and heaved the muck out through the open door. "Ye ken well enough that the terms of my parole dinna permit any such thing."

That was quite true; Grey had written those terms, and Fraser had signed them. He recalled the occasion vividly; it was the first—but not the last—occasion on which he had been sure that only the presence of armed guards kept Fraser from breaking his neck.

It was apparent from the Scot's ironic expression that he recalled the occasion, too.

"And if I wasna sufficiently honorable as to abide by those terms, Major," he added evenly, "I should have been in France a week after setting foot in this place."

Grey forbore to take issue with the notion of someone of Fraser's striking appearance being able to travel the roads without being noticed, or to cross fifty miles of open fell on foot, without cloak, food, or shelter—not least because he was convinced that the man quite possibly could have done so.

"I would never suggest a breach of honor on your part, Mr. Fraser," Grey said, and was mildly surprised to find that true. "I apologize if my question might have implied any such suggestion."

Fraser blinked.

"Accepted, Major," he said, a little gruffly. He paused, gripping the fork as though about to return to his work, but then the muscles of his shoulders relaxed.

"I said that the Stuart court leaks like a sieve, Major, because both King James and his son are still alive, and the same men still surround them. So far as I am in a position to know," he added, with a glint of dry humor.

"You don't think they've given up?" Grey asked curiously, choosing not to notice that "King James." "Surely they have no hope—"

"No, they have nay hope, and no, they've not given up," Fraser interrupted him, the dry note more pronounced. "They're Scots, for all they live their lives in the shadow of St. Peter's. They'll cease plotting

when they're dead."

"I see." He did. Eighteen months as governor of Ardsmuir was enough to have given him a useful estimation of the Scottish character. The Emperor Hadrian had known what he was about, he thought; pity later rulers of England had been less prudent.

With that thought in mind, he chose his words carefully.

"May I ask you a question, Mr. Fraser?"

"I see no way to stop ye, Major." But there was no rancor in Fraser's voice, and the light in his eye was the same that appeared when they played chess. Wariness, interest—and readiness.

"If I were to release you explicitly from that provision of your parole—and were to forward any letter you cared to send, wherever you chose to send it, without question—would you be able to contact someone who would know the names of prominent Jacobites in England? It would have been someone active in 1741."

He'd never seen Fraser drop-jawed, and didn't now, but the Scot plainly couldn't have been more taken aback had Grey suddenly kissed him on the mouth.

"That—" he began, then broke off and shook his head. "Do you—" He paused again, so patently appalled at the suggestion that words failed him.

"Do I know what I ask? Yes, I do, and I am sorry for it." Silence hung between them for a moment, broken by the champing of horses and the call of an early lark in the meadow beyond the stable.

"Please believe that I would not seek to make use of you in this fashion, were there any other choice," Grey said quietly.

Fraser stared at him for a moment, then pushed the fork into the heap of soggy straw, turned, and went out. He walked off into the growing dusk, to the paddock, and there stood, his back turned to Grey, gripping the upper rail of the fence as though trying to reestablish his grip on reality.

Grey didn't blame him. He felt completely unreal himself.

"Why?" Fraser asked bluntly, turning round at last.

"For my father's honor."

Fraser was silent for a moment.

"Do ye describe my own present situation as honorable, sir?"

"What?"

Fraser cast him an angry glance.

"Defeat—aye, that's honorable enough, if nothing to be sought. But I am not merely defeated, not only imprisoned by right of conquest. I am exiled, and made slave to an English lord, forced to do the will of my captors.

"And each day, I rise with the thought of my perished brothers, my men taken from my care and thrown to the mercies of sea and savages —and I lay myself down at night knowing that I am preserved from death only by the accident that my body rouses your unholy lust."

Grey's face was numb; he could not feel his lips move, and was surprised to hear the words come clearly nonetheless.

"It was never my intent to bring you dishonor."

He could see the Scot check his rising anger, with an effort of will.

"No, I dinna suppose that it was," he replied evenly.

"I don't suppose you wish to kill me?" Grey asked, as lightly as possible. "That would solve my immediate dilemma—and if you dislike your life as much as you appear to, the process would relieve you of that burden, as well. Two birds with one stone."

With startling swiftness, Fraser plucked a stone from the ground, and in the same motion, hurled it. There was a sickening thump, and jerking round, Grey saw a fallen rabbit, legs kicking in frantic spasm beneath a bush.

Without haste, Fraser walked over, picked it up, and broke its neck with a neat snap. Returning, he dropped the limp body at Grey's feet.

"Dead is dead, Major," he said quietly. "It is not a romantic notion. And whatever my own feelings in the matter, my family would not prefer my death to my dishonor. While there is anyone alive with a claim upon my protection, my life is not my own."

He walked off then, into the chilly twilight, and did not look back.



Grey left Helwater the next day. He did not see Fraser again—did not plan to—but carried a note to the stable at mid-morning. It was deserted, most of the horses gone, and the three grooms with them, as he'd expected.

He had taken some pains with the composition of the note, keeping it as formal and dispassionate as possible. He had, he wrote, informed Lord Dunsany that if Fraser chose to write any letters, to anyone whomsoever (that phrase underlined; he knew that Fraser wrote secretly to his family in the Highlands when he could), he was to be provided with paper and ink, and the letters dispatched under

Dunsany's seal, without question. The letters would not, he added delicately, be read by any save their intended recipients.

He had thought to leave the note, addressed to Fraser, pinned to a railing or stall where it would be easily found. But now he reconsidered; he didn't know whether the other grooms could read, nor whether their respect for Fraser might restrain their curiosity—but neither he nor Fraser would want the matter to be generally known and talked about.

Ought he to leave the note with Dunsany, to be delivered personally? He felt some delicacy about that; he did not wish Fraser to feel any pressure of Dunsany's expectations—only yours, he thought grimly. He hesitated for an instant, but then climbed the ladder to the loft where he knew Fraser slept, heart beating like a drum.

The loft was dim, but even in the poor light, it was apparent at once which spot was Fraser's. There were three striped mattress tickings on the floor, each with a lidded wooden crate beside it for clothes and personal belongings. Two of these were scattered with pipes, tobacco pouches, stray buttons, dirty handkerchiefs, empty beer jugs, and the like. The one on the left, a little distance from the others, was starkly bare, save for a tiny wooden statue of the Virgin and a rush dip, presently extinguished.

He found himself holding his breath, and forced himself to walk normally, footsteps echoing on the boards.

There was a single blanket on the ticking, neatly spread, but speckled with straw. Heaps of matted straw lay around each mattress like a nest; the grooms must pull hay over themselves for extra warmth. No wonder; his breath was white, and the chill of the place numbed his fingers.

The impulse to lift the lid of the box and see what lay within was nearly irresistible. But he had done enough to Jamie Fraser; to intrude into this last small bastion of his privacy would be unforgivable.

With this realization came another; it wouldn't do. Even to leave the note atop the crate, or discreetly placed beneath the blanket, which had been his first thought, would let Fraser know that Grey had been here—an intimacy in itself that the man would find an unwelcome violation.

"Well, damn it all anyway," he muttered to himself, and going down the ladder, found a bucket to stand on and pinned the note above the lintel of the tack room, in plain sight, but high enough that only Fraser would be able to reach it easily. He looked up toward the fells as he left the stable, searching for horsemen, but nothing showed save rags of drifting fog.

Chapter 21



Cowardice

The sailing had been put back two weeks because all of the necessary food and equipment had not yet arrived. Grey arrived at Percy's rooms at nightfall, soaking wet and chilled to the bone from a day spent shivering in the rain on the docks, negotiating the terms under which the goddamned chandler from Liverpool would actually deliver the barrels of salt pork for which he had been contracted, and the terms under which the ship's crew—contracted to carry said barrels—would actually load the goddamned barrels into the goddamned hold of the goddamned ship and batten down the goddamned hatches on top of them.

Percy rubbed him dry, gave him fresh clothes, made him lie on the bed, listened to his grievances, and poured him a brandy, which made him think that perhaps he wouldn't die just yet.

"Do you suppose fighting will be easier than the struggle to get to the battlefield?" Percy asked.

"Yes," Grey said, with conviction, and sneezed. "Much easier."

Percy laughed, and went down to fetch supper from the tavern on the corner, returning with bread, cheese, ale, and a pot of something purporting to be oyster stew, which was at least hot.

Grey began to emerge from his condition of sodden misery, enough to talk a little and take note of his surroundings. To his surprise, he saw that Percy had been drawing; a cheap artist's block and charcoal had been pushed to one side, the top sheet showing the view from the window, roughed in, but rendered with considerable skill and delicacy.

"This is very good," he said, picking it up. "I didn't know you could draw."

Percy shrugged, nonchalant, but clearly pleased by his praise.

"One of my mother's friends was an artist. He showed me a few things—though warning me that to become an artist was the only certain way to starve."

Grey laughed, and mellowed by fire, hot food, and ale, made no demur when Percy turned to a clean sheet of paper and began to sketch Grey's features. "Go ahead and talk," Percy murmured. "I'll tell you if I need you to be still."

"Whatever do you want a drawing of me for?"

Percy looked up from his work, brown eyes warm but serious in the candlelight.

"I want something of you to keep," he said. "Just in case."

Grey stopped, then set down his cup.

"I don't mean to leave you," he said quietly. "Did you think I would?"

Percy held his eyes, a faint smile on his lips.

"No," he said softly. "But you are a soldier, John, and we are going to war. Does it never occur to you that you might be killed?"

Grey rubbed a knuckle over his mouth, disconcerted.

"Well ... I suppose so. But I—to tell you the truth, I seldom think about it. After all, I might be run down in the street, or take a chill and die of pleurisy." He put out a finger and lifted his soggy shirt, hung over a stool to dry before the fire.

"Yes, you might," Percy said dryly, resuming his work. "The regimental surgeon told me that ten times more men die of the flux or plague or infection than ever are killed by an enemy. No reason you shouldn't be one of them, now, is there?"

Grey opened his mouth to reply to this, but in fact, there was no good answer.

"I know," Percy said, head bent over the paper. "You don't think about that, either."

Grey sighed, shifting a little.

"No," he admitted. "Are you worrying?"

Percy's teeth were set in his lip, his fingers making short, quick lines. After a moment, without looking up, he said suddenly, "I don't want you to think me a coward."

Oh, that was it. He ought to have known.

He was inclined to offer a simple reassurance, but hesitated. He had asked the same question, or something very like it, once. And Hector, his first lover, four years older and a seasoned soldier, had not given him the reassurance he'd asked for, but rather the honesty he'd needed. He couldn't offer Percy less.

"It's sometimes not so bad," he said, slowly, "and sometimes it's very terrible. And the truth is that you'll never know what it's going to be like—and you never know what you'll do."

Percy glanced up at him, eyes bright with interest.

"Have you ever run away?"

"Yes, of course. Doing your duty doesn't mean standing in front of a battery and being killed. Usually," he added as an afterthought. "And you must try to save your men, above all. If that means retreat, then you do—unless ordered to stand. If you do run, though, don't drop your weapon. Firstly, you'll likely bloody need it—and secondly, the quartermaster will stop the cost of it from your pay."

Percy flipped open his sketchbook and set his pencil to the page, frowning intently.

"Wait, let me get that down. *Primum*: save ... men. *Secundo*: do not ... drop ... weapon. *Tertio*—what's the third thing on this list?"

"Suck my prick," Grey said rudely. "Ass."

Percy promptly flipped the sketchbook shut and came toward him, eyes brighter still.

"Wait! I didn't mean it!"

"Just following orders," Percy murmured, pinning him to the bed with a deft knee on his thigh, and getting a hand on his flies. "Sir."

The brief and undignified struggle that followed—filled with muffled accusations of insubordination, high-handedness, disobedience, arrogance, contumacy, despotism, mutiny, and tyranny—ended in a truce that left the respective parties on the floor, breathless, flushed, disheveled, panting, and entirely satisfied with the negotiated terms of surrender.

Feeling boneless but peaceful, Grey struggled up from the floor and crawled onto the bed, where he lay half dozing as Percy tidied up the scattered remnants of their supper.

"Are you brave, John?" Percy drew a blanket over him, and kissed his forehead.

"No," he said, without hesitation. "The only time I ever *did* act from what I thought was courage ended in disaster."

He was astonished to hear his own voice saying this.

He'd told the whole story—perforce—to Hal at the time, though he would infinitely have preferred to be shot for desertion or flogged at the triangle than do so. He could still remember Hal's face during that telling: relief, dismay, fury, laughter, renewed fury, and—damn him—sympathy, all shifting through his fine-boned face like water over rocks. And the rocks beneath—the deep-cut lines and smudges of exhaustion, signs of the sleepless night Hal had spent searching for him.

He'd never told anyone else, and felt for an instant as though he

were on a sled, about to plunge down a steep, snowy slope with an icy abyss at its foot. But Percy's weight sank the mattress beside him, and his hand was warm on Grey's back.

"It was my first campaign," he said, with a deep breath. "The Stuart Rising. I hadn't got my commission yet; Hal took me with the regiment into Scotland, to have a taste of soldiering."

Which he'd taken to like a duck to water. He'd loved the rough camp life, the routines and drills, the intoxicating scents of steel and black powder. The exciting sense of danger as they marched upward, pressed on into the bleak crags and dark pines of the Highlands, the men drawing closer, becoming more watchful, as civilization faded behind them. Most of all, the simple pleasure of the company of men, and the sense of himself as one of them.

He was quick, eager, and comfortable with weapons; had been taught to use a sword nearly as soon as he could stand, and to hunt with both gun and bow. He'd quickly made a place for himself as a forager and scout, and the men's wary regard of him as the colonel's younger brother ripened into a casual respect for him as a man. For a sixteen-year-old on his first campaign, it was more intoxicating than Holland gin.

He went out regularly with the other scouts, casting about in the evening to be sure there was no lurking threat as camp was made.

"Usually, we went out in pairs; I'd been out with a soldier named Jenks that evening. Decent fellow, but built like an ox. He'd get out of breath easily, and didn't care much for climbing in the steep mountains." And so when Grey had thought he'd seen smoke, a half mile high above them in the Carryarick Pass, Jenks had assured him he hadn't.

"He might have been right; the light was going, and I couldn't be sure. We turned back to camp. But it niggled at me—what if I had seen it?"

And so he'd slipped out of camp after supper. Should have told someone, but didn't. He wasn't afraid of getting lost. And if it was nothing, he didn't want to be mocked for making a fuss or seeing shadows. He might have told Hector—but Hector had gone to the rear with a message for the captain of the Royal Artillery company that was traveling with them, bringing cannon for General Cope.

He did see shadows. Nearly three-quarters of a mile up the side of one of Scotland's crags, the wind brought him the scent of smoke. And creeping through brush and bracken, stealthy as a fox in the gathering gloom, he'd seen at last the flicker of a small fire and the movement of shadows against the trees of a clearing.

"And then I heard her voice. A woman's voice. An *Englishwoman's* voice."

"What, on a mountainside in the Highlands?" Percy's voice reflected his own incredulity at the time. Even now, a decade and more past the Rising, the barbarian clansmen crushed or removed, the Highlands of Scotland remained a desolate wilderness. No one in his right mind would go there now—save soldiers, whose duty it was. But a woman? Then?

He'd crept closer, sure his ears were deceiving him.

"It couldn't be Jacobite troops, in any case, I thought. It was only a single tiny fire. And when I got close enough to see ..."

His heart had given such a lurch of excitement that he nearly choked on it. There was a man in the clearing, sitting on a log, relaxed.

He could so vividly recall his first sight of Jamie Fraser, and the fierce rush of emotions involved—alarm, panic, dizzying excitement. The hair, of course, first of all, the hair. Bound back loosely, not ginger but a deep red, a red like a stag's coat, but a red that glinted in the firelight as the man bent to push another stick into the fire.

The size of the man, and the sense of power in him. Plainly a Scot, by his dress, by his speech. He'd heard stories of Red Jamie Fraser—surely there couldn't be two like him. But was it, could it be, really?

He'd realized that he was holding his breath only when spots began to swim before his eyes. And, trying to breathe silently, had seen the woman come into view on the far side of the fire.

She was an Englishwoman, he could see it at once. More than that, a lady. A tall woman, crudely dressed, but with the skin, the carriage, the refined features of a noblewoman. And certainly the voice. She was addressing the man crossly; he laughed.

She called him by name—by God, it was Jamie Fraser! And through his haze of panic and excitement, Grey made out the man's reply and realized with horror that he was making indecent insinuations to the woman, stating a plain intent to take her to his bed. He had kidnapped her, then—and dragged her to this distant spot in order to dishonor her without the possibility of rescue or interference.

Grey's first impulse had been to retire quietly through the brush, then tear down the mountain as fast as possible and run back to camp to fetch some men to apprehend Fraser. But the presence of the Englishwoman altered everything. He dare not leave her in the Scot's grasp. He had so far had one experience in a brothel, and knew just how quickly immoral transactions could be accomplished. By the time he got back with help, it would be far too late.

He was sure his heartbeat must be audible at a distance, hard as it was hammering in his own ears.

"I'd come armed, of course." He kept his eyes fixed on the ceiling, as though the egg-and-dart molding told some gripping tale. "A pistol and a dagger in my belt."

But he hadn't loaded the pistol. Cursing himself silently, he'd grappled for a moment with the problem: risk the delay of loading, the sound of the shot, plus the possibility of missing, or use the dagger?

"You didn't think of taking him prisoner?" Percy asked curiously. "Rather than trying to kill him?"

"I did, yes," Grey said, a slight edge to his voice. "But I was reasonably sure that his own men were somewhere nearby. He was well known, one of the Scottish chiefs; the clans were gathering—he wouldn't be alone at all, if it weren't for the woman.

"And it was dark, and the clearing was completely surrounded by forest. You've never seen a Scottish pine forest—two steps into the trees, and a man has vanished from sight. If I tried to take him prisoner, he might either shout for help—and I certainly couldn't take on a horde of clansmen—or simply dive into the brush and be gone. Which would leave me and the woman as sitting ducks; his men would be on us long before I could get her down off the bloody mountain. But if I could kill him quietly, I thought, then I could get her away to safety before anyone knew. So I drew my dagger."

"That's what you meant about courage." Percy's hand tightened on his shoulder. "My God, I wouldn't have had the nerve even to think of doing something like that!"

"Well, you would have been a good deal more intelligent than I was, then," Grey said dryly.

His face felt hot, flushed both with embarrassment at the memory and with the memory itself, of blood pounding through his body at the prospect of his first kill.

He'd marked out the distance carefully—three paces, to be covered at a bound. Then fling his arm round the man's head and pull it back, rip the dagger hard across the stretched throat. That's what Sergeant O'Connell had instructed them to do, taking an enemy unawares in close quarters. They'd practiced, he and several of the younger soldiers, taking it in turn to play victim or killer. He knew just what to do.

"So I did it," he said, with a sigh. "I flung my arm round his head—and it wasn't there anymore. Next thing I knew, I was somersaulting through the air."

The dagger went flying from his sweating fingers. He slammed hard into the earth and something fell on him. He'd fought back by instinct, dazed and breathless, but knowing that he fought for his life. Kicked, punched, clawed, bit—and for the most part, encountered only empty air.

Meanwhile, some elemental force had set about him, and a bone-cracking blow to the ribs drove the rest of the breath out of him. He reached out blindly, something grabbed his arm with a grip of steel and twisted it up his back. He lunged upward in panic, and his arm had snapped like a stick.

"Well ... the long and the short of it is that the Englishwoman turned out to be Fraser's *wife*, curse her. And I, for my pains, ended up tied to a tree and left for my brother's men to find in the morning."

"Jesus! All night, you were there? With your arm broken? You must have been in torment!"

"Well, yes," Grey admitted reluctantly. "It was more the biting midges, though. And needing desperately to have a pee. I didn't really notice the arm much." He didn't mention the searing pain of the burn along the edge of his jaw, where Fraser had laid the hot blade of his dirk—or his raw back, where he'd rubbed most of the skin off, trying to free himself. None of this bodily discomfort had seemed important, by contrast with the agony of mind occasioned by the realization of the depth of the betrayal he had been led into.

"Meanwhile—" He cleared his throat, determined to finish. "Meanwhile, Fraser and his men had crept round behind the camp, to the artillery park, taken all the wheels off the cannon, and burnt them. Using information I'd given them."

Percy had been looking at him with sympathy. At this last confession, his mouth fell open. For an instant, shock showed in his eyes. Then he reached over and took Grey's left arm in both hands, feeling gently through the shirt. The bone was lumpy, where it had healed.

"What did he do to you?" Percy asked quietly. "This Fraser?"

"It doesn't matter," Grey said, a little gruffly. "I should have let him

kill me." He had in fact been convinced that Fraser *did* mean to kill him—and hadn't spoken. The truth ... well, he'd told Hal. He shut his eyes, but didn't pull his arm away. Percy's hands were warm, his thumbs gently stroking along the bone.

"It was the woman," he said, resigned to complete humiliation. "He threatened her. And I—idiot that I was—spoke, in order to save her."

"Well, what else could you do?" Percy said, his tone so reasonable that Grey opened his eyes and stared at him. Percy smiled a little.

"Of course you would protect the woman," he said. "You protect everyone, John—I don't suppose you can help it."

Astonished, Grey opened his mouth to contest this absurd statement, but was forestalled when Percy leaned forward and kissed him softly.

"You are the bravest man I know," Percy said, his breath warm on Grey's cheek. "And you will not convince me otherwise. Still ..." He sat back, surveying Grey with interest. "I admit to surprise that you did become a soldier, after *that* experience."

"My father was a soldier, so was Hal. I never thought of being anything else," Grey said, truthfully. He managed a crooked smile. "And you do see the world."

Percy's face lighted at that.

"I've never been outside the British Isles. I've always wanted to see Italy—pity there's no fighting there. Shall I like Germany, do you think?"

Grey recognized Percy's attempt to leave the subject of his humiliation, and gave him a look saying as much—but accepted it, nonetheless.

"Probably, if you don't catch the flux. The beer is very good. But as to Italy—perhaps we will go there. In the winter, when the campaigning is done. I should like very much to show you Rome."

"Oh, I should like that of all things! You have been there—what do you recall most vividly?"

Grey blinked. In truth, his impressions of Rome were largely jumbles of ancient stone: the flat black paviors of the Appian Way, the marble baths of Caracalla, the dark, grease-smelling pits of the catacombs, their heaps of dusty brown skulls seeming as much a part of the cave as the rock itself.

"The seagulls on the Tiber," he said suddenly. "They call all night long, in Rome. You hear their cries ringing from the stones of the streets. It's strangely moving."

"Seagulls?" Percy looked incredulous. "There are seagulls on the Thames, for God's sake." Grey glanced at the window, dark now, and streaked with rain.

"Yes. It's ... different in Rome. You'll see," he said, and rising on his elbow, kissed Percy back.

Chapter 22



Shame

Life, as was its wont, became still busier. After their impromptu supper, Grey did not see Percy again for nearly a week, save for brief glimpses across the parade ground or a quick exchange of smiles as they passed in a corridor. He had no time to wish for more. The pressure of events was increasing, day by day, and he could feel responsibility wrapped like a strangling vine about his spinal cord, reaching eager fingers into the base of his skull.

He hadn't been home in three days, and was living exclusively on stale coffee, Cornish pasties, and the odd gulp of brandy. Something, he thought, was going to snap. He hoped it would be only his temper, when the time came, and not someone else's neck.

The tension was not limited to Grey, nor even to the officers. In the men, it was manifested as anticipation and exuberance, but with a nervous edge that gave rise to quarrels and petty conflicts, fights over misplaced equipment and borrowed whores. These were for the most part ignored, dealt with summarily by the sergeants, or settled privately between the aggrieved parties. But some things necessarily became public matters.

Two days before they began the march to Gravesend for embarkation, four companies were summoned to the square to witness a punishment. Crime, theft. Sentence, a hundred lashes—sentence reduced to fifty by the commanding officer, to insure that the man would be fit to march out with his companions.

Percy Wainwright was the lieutenant in charge, the commanding officer, though punishment was attended, as usual, by several senior officers—Grey among them.

He disliked the process, but understood its necessity. Usually, he simply stood, face impassive and eyes focused somewhere beyond what was happening. This time, though, he watched Percy.

Everything went smoothly. Percy seemed well in control of his men, the situation, and himself. And if he was white to the lips and openly sweating, that was nothing remarkable in a young commander performing this office for the first time.

Percy's eyes were fixed on the process, and despite himself, Grey

could not help following them. It was not severe, as such things went, though the man's back was welted and bloody after a dozen strokes. Grey watched the rhythmic swing of the cat, heard the sergeant's chanted count, and began, with a sudden sense of disorientation, to feel the impact of each blow in the pit of his stomach.

He fought the impulse to close his eyes.

He began to feel ill, the residue of his black-coffee breakfast churning inside him, rising up at the back of his throat. He was sweating, and fighting the sudden illusion that it was rain that ran down his face and neck.

His eyes were still open, but it was no longer the spring sunshine of the parade ground he saw, nor the stocky young soldier, groaning and flinching at each blow. He stood in the gray stone yard of Ardsmuir Prison, and saw rain run gleaming over straining shoulders, run mixed with blood down the deep groove of Jamie Fraser's back.

He swallowed back bile and looked at his boots. Stood quietly, breathing, until it was finished.

The man was taken down from the triangle, helped away by his friends to the surgeon for a lathering of goose-grease and charcoal. Companies dismissed, leaving in an orderly fashion, quiet, as men tended to be after witnessing punishment. But when Grey turned to look for Percy, he had vanished.

Supposing that he required a moment's privacy—he'd looked as though he were about to vomit, too—Grey returned to his own work, but made a point of coming back later, to inquire casually how Percy did, perhaps offer a drink or advice, as needed.

He did not find Percy in any of the places a second lieutenant would normally be. Surely he had not simply left and gone home to his rooms in Audley Street? Not without telling anyone, Grey thought, and no one recalled seeing him after the flogging.

It took quite a bit of casual wandering about, poking into this and that, before he finally found Percy, in one of the storage sheds behind the parade ground, where spare equipment was kept.

"All right?" he inquired, seeing Percy sitting on a mounting-block. It was a bright day, and sunlight fell through the boards of the shed, striping him with red where the light caught his uniform coat.

"Yes. Just thinking." Percy's face was in shadow, but his voice was calm.

"Ah. Don't let me interrupt, then." Grey reached for the door, but wasn't surprised when Percy stood up.

"No, don't go. It was good of you to come look for me." He put his arms round Grey for a moment, bending his head so that their cheeks brushed.

Grey stiffened for an instant, surprised and half-alarmed—but it was quiet outside; the parade ground was empty, everyone bustling to finalize their preparations for departure. He returned the embrace, comforted by the touch, arousal stimulated by the sense of danger—but then stepped back.

"Quite sure you're all right?" Percy had stopped sweating, and was no longer white, but was plainly still disturbed in mind. He nodded, though.

"That—reducing the sentence—was that all right?" he asked.

"Under the circumstances." Grey paused, hand on the jamb. "Do you need a moment?"

Percy shrugged, and moved restlessly round the confines of the shed, kicking at things.

"This—what's it called?"

"A whirligig." A cylindrical cage made of slats, with a door in one side. It was used for minor punishments, lateness or missing equipment. "You put a man inside, and two men spin it round."

"Do you—do we—use these often?" Percy nudged the toe of his boot at the horse, a wooden thing like a child's rocking-horse—save that the back was not flat, but rose to a ridge.

"It depends." Grey watched him, saw the disturbance in him, his usual grace lost as he moved about, restless, unable to settle. He felt the echo of it in his own flesh, and coughed, trying to dispel it. "Some officers use punishment a great deal; others not so much. And sometimes there's no help for it."

Percy nodded, but without looking at him. He stood for a few moments, looking at the shelves that ran along one wall, where various bits of equipment were stored. There were two baize bags there, where the cats were kept.

"Did you ever wonder what it's like?" he asked suddenly. "To be flogged?"

Grey felt a clenching in his innards, but answered honestly.

"Yes. Now and then." Once, at least.

Percy had been kneading one of the red baize bags, like a cat sharpening its claws. Now he let it fall to the floor, and took up the cat-o'nine-tails itself, a short handle with a cluster of leather cords.

"Do you want to find out?" he said, very softly.

"What?" An extraordinary feeling ran through Grey, half-fear, half-excitement.

"Take off your coat," Percy said, still softly.

In a state of something like shock, Grey found his hand go to the buttons of his waistcoat. He felt as though sleepwalking, not believing any of it—that Percy had suggested it, that he was doing it. Then his shirt was off, and gooseflesh rose on his back and shoulders.

"Turn around," Percy said, and he did, facing the horse.

The cords struck across his shoulders like the sting of a jellyfish, sharp and sudden. His hands closed tight on the horse's back.

"Again," he said, half breathless.

He heard Percy shift his weight, felt his interest shift as well, from the sense of nervous excitement to something more.

"Sure?" said Percy softly.

He bent a little forward and spread his arms, taking a fresh grip, exposing the full reach of his bare back. The stroke caught him just below the shoulderblades, with a force that drove the breath out of him and stung to the tips of his fingers.

"More?" The word was whispered. He could feel Percy's breath, warm on the back of his neck, feel him close, the touch of a hand light on the naked skin of his waist.

God, don't touch me! he thought, and felt his stomach clench as his gorge rose. But what he said, hoarse and low was, "Again. Don't stop."

Three more blows, and Percy stopped. Grey turned round to see him gripping the cat in both hands, face white.

"I've cut you. I'm sorry."

He could feel the weal, a vivid line that ran from his right shoulderblade, angled down across the center of his back. It felt as though someone had pressed a hot wire into his skin.

"Don't be," he said. "I asked."

"Yes, but—" Percy had seized his shirt, draped it across his bare shoulders. "I shouldn't have started it. It—I didn't mean—I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Grey said again. "You wanted to know. So did I."



He dreamed of it, the night before they left.

Felt himself bound, and the dread of shame. Pain, disfigurement—but most of all, shame. That a gentleman should find himself in such

case, exposed.

The men were drawn up in their square, eyes front. But he realized slowly that they were not looking at him. Somehow he became separate, and felt profound relief that after all it was not him.

And yet he felt the blows, grunting with each one, like a beast.

Saw the man taken down at the end, dragged away by two men who held his arms across their shoulders, his own feet stumbling as though he were drunk. Saw a stark-boned face gone slack with exhaustion, eyes closed and the water running, dripping, face shimmering with it, his hair nearly black, so saturated as it was with sweat and rain.

Spreading ointment across the torn and furrowed skin, his fingers thick with it so as to touch as lightly as possible. Fierce heat radiated from the man's back, though the skin of his arms was cool, damp with drying sweat. Picked up a linen towel to blot the sweat from the man's neck, untied the thong that bound his soaked hair and began to rub it dry.

He felt the hum of some tune in throat and chest, and felt great happiness as he worked. The man said nothing; he did not expect it. He smoothed the long thick strands of half-dry hair between his fingers, and wiped the curve of ears that reminded him of a small boy's, heartbreaking in their tenderness.

Then he realized that he was straddling the man, and that they were both naked. The man's buttocks rose beneath him, smooth and round and powerful, perfect by contrast with the bloody back. And warm. Very warm.

Woke with a dreadful feeling of shame, heavy in his belly. The sound of dripping water in his ears.

The dripping of rain. The drip of sweat, of blood and seed. Not tears. The man had never wept, even in extremity.

Yet his pillow was wet. The tears were his.

Through the rest of the day, as he rode at the head of the marching column, as they passed through the streets of London, and down to the Pool where they would embark, he would now and then brush his fingers lightly beneath his nose, expecting each time to catch a whiff of the medicated salve.

Chapter 23



The Rhineland

Tom Byrd was in his element. He circled Grey like a vulture round a prime bit of carrion, visibly gloating.

"Very nice, me lord," he said with approval, reaching out to tweak a small fold out of the buff lapel of Grey's best dress uniform, straighten the edge of a six-inch cuff, or rearrange the fall of an epaulet cord. "Don't you think he looks well, sir?" He appealed to Percy, who was lounging against the wall, watching Grey's apotheosis.

"I am blinded by his glory," Percy assured Tom gravely. "He'll be a credit to you, I'm sure."

"No, he won't," Tom said, standing back with a sigh. "He'll have gravy spilt down his ruffles before the evening's out. That, or he'll take a bet from someone and jump that big white bastard of a horse over a wall with his arms crossed, and fall off into a bog. Again. Or—"

"I did not fall off," Grey said, affronted. "The horse slipped when we landed, and rolled on me."

"Well, it did your clothes no good at all, me lord," Tom said severely. He leaned closer, breathed heavily on a silver button, and polished it obsessively with his sleeve.

Grey was indeed splendid, got up regardless, with his hair tightly plaited, folded round a lamb's-wool pad, bound in a club, and powdered. Boots, buttons, and sword hilt gleaming, and his officer's gorget polished to a brilliant shine, he was the very model of a British soldier. It was largely wasted effort; no one would look twice at an English officer in a room full of Prussians and Hanoverians, whose officers, even when not royalty or nobility, tended to a great deal of gold lace, embroidery, and plumes. He stood stiffly, hardly daring to breathe, as Tom prowled round him, looking for something else to poke at.

"Oh, I want to go to the ball, too!" Percy said, mocking.

"No, you don't," Grey assured him. "It will be speeches half the night, of the most pompous sort, and an endless procession of roast peacocks with their feathers on, gilded trout, and similar glorious inedibles."

He would, in fact, much prefer a supper of eggs and beans in his

tent with Tom and Percy. Normally, a mere major would not be invited to the dinner which celebrated the joining together of the new allied Hanoverian army under His Grace, Duke Ferdinand of Brunswick.

Hal must go, of course, not only as an earl in his own right—though English earls were small beer by comparison to the margraves, landgraves, electors, and princes who would be in attendance—but as colonel of his own regiment. Grey was invited because he was Melton's brother, but also because he was acting as lieutenant-colonel of the regiment, in the absence of the officer who normally fulfilled that office, who had succumbed to food poisoning halfway across the Channel. It would not do for Hal to appear in such august company completely unattended. Ewart Symington had pleaded indisposition—Symington did not speak German and hated social occasions—and so Grey and his best uniform were being pressed into service.

"Are you ready?" Hal poked his own powdered head in, inquiring.

"As I'll ever be," Grey said, straightening himself. "Tom, you won't forget about the bottles?"

"Oh, no, me lord," Tom assured him. "You can count on me."

"Well, then." He crooked an arm toward his brother, and bowed. "Shall we dance?"

"Ass," said Hal, but tolerantly.

The feast, held in the ancient guildhall, was exactly as Grey had predicted: long, eye-glazingly boring, and featuring course after course of roast pork, boiled beef, gravied mutton, roasted pheasants, sliced ham, braised quail, grilled fish, eggs in aspic and in pies, shellfish in soup, in pastry, and on the half shell, plus sundry savories, syllabubs, and sweets, all served on a weight of silver plate sufficient to purchase a small country and washed down with gallons of wine, drunk in a succession of endless toasts in honor of everyone from Frederick, King of Prussia, King George of England, and Duke Ferdinand down to—Grey was sure—the kitchen cat, though by the time this point in the proceedings was reached, no one was paying sufficient attention as to be sure.

The German officers were indeed splendid. Grey particularly noticed a tall, blond young Hanoverian, whose uniform was that of his friend von Namtzen's regiment—though von Namtzen himself was nowhere in sight. Contriving to have speech of the young lieutenant before dinner—and wondering to himself how the man came to be at such an affair—he learned that the young man's name was Weber,

and that he was there as attendant to a senior officer of von Namtzen's Imperial Hanoverian Foot, owing to an outbreak of some plague amongst the regiment that had temporarily rendered most of the other senior officers *hors de combat*.

"Is Captain von Namtzen also afflicted?" Grey asked, covertly admiring the man's face, which, with its deep-set blue eyes and sensual mouth, looked like that of an angel thinking lewd thoughts.

Weber shook his head, a small frown marring the perfection of his features.

"Alas, no."

"Alas?" Grey echoed, surprised.

"The captain suffered an accident, late in the autumn," Weber explained. "No more than a scratch, while hunting—but it festered, you know, and his *Blut* was poisoned, so the doctors had to take it off."

"Take what off?"

"Oh, *Entschuldigung*, I am not clear." Weber bowed in apology, and Grey caught a whiff of his cologne, something spiced and warm. "It was his arm he has lost. His left arm," he added, in the interests of strict accuracy.

Grey swallowed, shocked.

"I am so sorry to hear this," he said. "The captain—he is recovering?"

"Oh, *ja*," Weber assured him, turning his head a little as the gong began to sound as signal for the men to take their seats. "He is at his lodge. He will perhaps be well enough to join the campaign in another month. We hope so." His eyes lingered on Grey's in friendly fashion. "We meet again soon, perhaps?"

Grey nodded, and went to find Hal, unsettled by the news about von Namtzen, but glad to hear that at least Stephan was recovering. Just inside the door of the guildhall, a phalanx of trumpeters raised their horns and blew a salute that ruffled the banners that hung from the ceiling, announcing the ceremonious arrival of Duke Ferdinand.

"Well, now we're for it," Hal muttered, watching a servant fill his glass in preparation for the first toast.

"Here is to our glorious victory!" said the man beside him in German, beaming.

"Here's to us being able to walk out of here without help," Hal replied in English, smiling cordially.

The overall result of this affair was firstly that desired by the

occasion—the introduction of the commanders to one another, and the creation of a sense of joint grandeur and invincibility. The secondary result was what might be expected after three hours of continuous drinking of toasts, during which it would be considered unthinkably discourteous for anyone to leave the table.

Grey was beginning to suffer serious discomfort, and to be sure that Tom had forgotten after all, when he felt the servant who stood behind his chair turn aside for a moment, then lean over. He moved his foot gently and found the empty magnum that had been placed beneath his chair.

"Thank you," Grey said, in heartfelt relief. He grinned across the table at Hal, who was also looking somewhat tense, though keeping up appearances nobly. "Do the same for my brother, would you?"

It was well past midnight by the time the dinner was concluded, and the commanders and senior officers of the allied Hanoverian army staggered out into the cool spring night, most of them dashing for the nearest sheltering wall or tree.

The Greys, in no such need, strolled with smug insouciance through the dark streets toward the inn where they were quartered, talking randomly of the evening, the personalities encountered, and their private opinions regarding the history, ability, and expected effectiveness of the aforementioned.

Grey was filled with a pleasant sense of well-being, brought on by two or three quarts of wine and spirits, and a sense of anticipation regarding the coming campaign. It was true that he and Percy would not have the sort of intimacy they had been allowed in London—but they would be in each other's company, sharing adventure and a camaraderie of the spirit. As for that of the body ... well, opportunity did occur now and then—and at the worst, they had winter to look forward to, and the privacy and freedom of Rome.

Buoyed by these pleasant thoughts and the brilliant light of a full moon, it was some time before he realized that Hal was not sharing his elation, but was pacing along with his head down, evidently weighed down by some preoccupation.

"What's the matter?" Grey asked. "Were we slighted in some manner that I didn't notice?"

"What?" Hal glanced at him, surprised. "Oh. No, of course not. I was only thinking that I wished it had been France."

"Well, France has its advantages," Grey said judiciously, "quite aside from the fact that it's full of Frenchmen. But I think we'll do

well enough here."

"Ass," Hal said again, though without heat. "It's nothing to do with the campaign; that's all right—we may be in the minority here, but I think we shall have a good deal more autonomy under Ferdinand than we might under Frederick. No," he continued, frowning at the uneven cobbles in the street, "I wanted France because of the Jacobite exiles there."

"Oh?" The word "Jacobite" pricked a hole in the soap bubble of Grey's intoxication, and he put out a hand to ward off a passing tree. "Why?"

He hadn't told Hal anything regarding his inquiries of Jamie Fraser; no need, unless they came to something. They had seen Sir George and Lady Stanley safely embarked for Havana, the week before their own sailing, and in the frantic rush of embarkation, Grey had not spared a single thought for the puzzle surrounding his father's death. No more journal pages had surfaced; no further attacks had been made. The whole business seemed to have vanished, as suddenly as it had begun.

"Nothing, probably. Only I had a name or two, from Bath—"

"Bath?" Grey said, stumbling slightly. "What the bloody hell is in Bath?"

Hal glanced at him, then made a small gesture of resignation.

"Victor Arbuthnot," he said.

For a few moments, Grey could not place the name, but then it came to him.

"Father's old friend? The one he did astronomy with?" Hal snorted.

"He may have done astronomy, but his friendship is questionable. He was the man who presumably denounced Father as a Jacobite conspirator."

"He—what?" Grey came to an abrupt halt, staring. The moon was bright enough that his brother's face was fully visible. He could see that Hal was at least as drunk as he was, though still able to walk and speak. "You found him—and you let him live?"

Hal waved a hand impatiently, nearly overbalanced, and gripped a tree.

"Arbuthnot swears he did not. He gave a statement, yes, and bitterly regrets it. I might have done it, too, if they'd done to me what they did to him." Hal's jaw tightened a little as he swallowed. "He admitted to being a Jacobite himself, to conspiring with Catholics

from Italy and from Ireland, thinking it was safe enough to give their names—but he swears he gave no names of men within England; no one who could be taken up and questioned. And definitely not Father."

Grey didn't bother asking why Hal believed Arbuthnot. Plainly he did, and Hal was not a fool.

"Then how does he explain—"

"He doesn't know. He didn't write the statement himself—he couldn't." Hal's mouth twisted. "He only signed it—with a man named Bowles tenderly guiding his hand, he said."

"Bowles," Grey said slowly. His own insides had surged at the name, and he swallowed several times, to make sure they stayed put. "You ... know this Bowles?"

Hal shook his head. "Harry does. Small sadist with a face like a pudding, he says. Intelligencer. You've met him?"

"Once," Grey said, and pulled at his stock, wanting air. "Just the once."

"Yes, well, I don't know what he is now, and Arbuthnot didn't know what he was then—an assistant of some kind, Arbuthnot said. I sent Mr. Beasley to look for the original statement," Hal added abruptly. "Not to be found."

"Secret? Or destroyed?"

"Don't know. He couldn't find anybody who would admit even to having seen the thing."

And yet that statement was the basis for the warrant of arrest issued for Gerard Grey, first Duke of Pardloe. The warrant that had never been served.

"Jesus." They had stopped walking, and without the flow of air across his face, Grey felt his gorge rising. "I think I'm going to puke."

He did, and stayed bent over for a minute, hands on his thighs, breathing heavily. The purging seemed to have helped, though; he was somewhat light-headed when he stood up, but his mind seemed clearer.

"You said, 'definitely not Father.' Do you—or does he, rather—mean that Father was a Jacobite, but Arbuthnot didn't denounce him? Or that he wasn't a Jacobite at all?"

"Naturally he wasn't a Jacobite," Hal said, angry. "What are you saying?"

"Well, if he wasn't—and you know that for a fact—why do you want to talk to Jacobites in France?" He stared at Hal, whose face was

pallid in the moonlight, his eyes dark holes.

"He wasn't," Hal repeated stubbornly. "I just—I just—wait." He swallowed visibly, and Grey could see the sheen of sweat on his brow.

Grey nodded, and sat down on a low wall, trying not to hear the retching noises; his own stomach hadn't quite settled yet, and he felt pale and clammy.

A few minutes later, Hal came back out of the shadows and sat down heavily beside him.

"Damned oysters," he said. "You oughtn't to eat oysters in a month without an 'R' in it, everyone knows that." Grey nodded, forbearing to point out that it was March, and they sat still for a time, a cold breeze drying the sweat on their faces.

"You could have told me, Hal," Grey said quietly. They were sitting on the wall of a churchyard, and the shadow of the church itself covered them in darkness. He could no longer see Hal as anything save an indistinct blur, but could sense him and hear him breathing.

Hal didn't answer for some time, but finally said, "Told you what?"

"Told me that Father was murdered." He swallowed, tasting wine and bile. "I—should have liked to be able to speak of it with you."

He felt the shift of Hal's weight as his brother turned toward him.

"What did you say?" Hal whispered.

"I said why could you not have *told* me—oh. Oh, Jesus." His bones turned to water, as he belatedly grasped the horror in his brother's question. "Jesus, Hal. You didn't *know*?"

His brother was absolutely silent.

"You didn't know," Grey said, voice shaking as he answered his own question. He turned toward Hal, wondering where the words had come from; he hadn't any breath at all. "You thought he killed himself. I thought you knew. I thought you always knew."

He heard Hal draw breath, slowly.

"How do you know this?" Hal said, very calmly.

"I was there."

Hardly knowing what he said for the roaring in his ears, he told the story of that summer dawn in the conservatory, and the smell of the smashed peach. Heard the echo of that first telling, felt the ghost of Percy warm beside him.

At some point, he realized dimly that Hal's face was wet with tears. He didn't realize that he was weeping, as well, until Hal fumbled in his sleeve by reflex, pulled out a handkerchief, and handed it to him.

He mopped his face, scarcely noticing what he did.

"I thought—I was sure that Mother had told you. And that the two of you then had decided that I wasn't to know. You sent me to Aberdeen."

Hal was shaking his head, back and forth, like an automaton; Grey could feel, rather than see it, though he made out the movement when Hal wiped his nose heedlessly on his sleeve. It occurred briefly to Grey that he didn't think he'd seen his brother cry since the death of his first wife.

"That ... that cunning old ... oh, God. That bloody woman. How could she? And alone—all these years, alone!" Hal covered his face with both hands.

"Why?" Grey felt breath beginning to move in his chest again. "Why in God's name would she not tell you? I understand her wishing to keep the truth from me, given my age, but—you?"

Hal was beginning to get himself under control, though his voice still cracked, going raggedly from one emotion to another, relief succeeded by dismay, only to be replaced by horror, sorrow giving way to anger.

"Because she knew I'd go after the bastard. And, damn her, she thought he'd kill me, too." Hal brought a fist down on the wall, making no sound. "God *damn* it!"

"You think she knew who it was." Spoken aloud, the words hung in the air between them.

"She knows at least who it might be," Hal said at last. He stood up and picked up his hat. "Let's go."

The brothers walked the rest of the way in silence.

Chapter 24



Skirmish

As one of the battalion's two majors, Grey held responsibility for roughly four hundred troops. When the army was on the move, it was his duty to ensure that everyone turned up in the right place, more or less at the right time, suitably trained and equipped to do whatever they had been sent to do. As Hal's acting lieutenant-colonel, it was also his work to be actively in the field when the regiment was engaged, managing the logistics of battle, directing the movements of some twenty-six companies, and carrying out—to the best of his ability—such strategy and tactics as his orders gave him.

Through the entire month of April, the forces of Duke Ferdinand and his English allies had been on the move—but not engaged, owing to the cowardly disinclination of the Duc de Richelieu's French and Austrian troops to stand still and fight.

Consequently, the army had moved up, down, and side ways to the Rhine Valley for weeks, forcing the French gradually back toward their own border, but never managing to force an engagement.

Consequently, Grey's daily occupation consisted generally of sixteen hours of argument with Prussian sutlers, Hanoverian mule drivers, and English quartermasters, endless meetings, inspecting and approving—or not—each new campsite, housing, and culinary arrangement, dealing with outbreaks of flux and pox, and dictating orders to—and listening to the excuses for not following said orders—of twenty-six company commanders regarding the behavior, equipment, and disposition of their men.

Grey sought occasional relief from this tedium by going out on patrols with one or another company. The ostensible—and in fact the actual—purpose of this exercise was for him to judge the companies' readiness and the competence of their officers. So far as he was concerned, the principal benefit of such excursions was to keep him from losing either his temper or his mind.

He must rigorously avoid any appearance of favoritism, of course, and was in the habit of choosing which company to attend by dint of throwing a dart at the list hung on the wall of his tent. By the vagaries of chance, therefore, the lot did not fall on one of Lieutenant

Wainwright's companies until late April.

He saw Percy himself often—they shared supper most evenings, whether in the officer's mess or privately, in Grey's tent—and of course inquired after his companies in the usual way—but most of their conversation was of a personal nature. He had not yet seen Percy work his men, save for drills, and thus went out on April 24 in a state of mingled anticipation and apprehension.

He rode a gelding called Grendel, whose mild temper belied his name, and the weather had obligingly adopted a similar disposition. The day was sunny and warm, and the men more than happy to be out and active. Percy was nervous, but hid it reasonably well, and everything went smoothly for most of the day. In early afternoon, though, the column found themselves perhaps six miles from camp, progressing along the edge of a bluff over the river.

The terrain was thickly wooded, but with a broad, grassy lip along the edge of the bluff, and a good breeze came up from the silver sheet of the Rhine below—a grateful relief to men who had made the steep climb up the bluff in full uniform and equipment. Then the wind changed, and Grendel's head came up, nostrils flaring. His ears went forward.

Grey reined up at once. Ensign Tarleton saw his movement and properly signaled the company to halt, which they did in a rather blundering, complaining fashion, muttering and stepping on each other's heels. Percy turned round to frown at them in rebuke.

"Tell your men to fall into firing order; I don't like something over there," Grey said under his breath. He nodded at a copse, a hundred yards away. The wind was coming from that direction; it touched his face.

The other officers' horses were lifting their heads now, nickering uncertainly. Percy didn't ask questions but rose in his stirrups, calling orders. The sense of alarm spread like fire in straw; all complaint and disorder vanished in a moment, and the men snapped into a double line, their corporal shouting the orders to load.

A blast of musket fire burst from the copse, a stitchery of bright flashes through the trees and a sharp smell of powder smoke, borne on the breeze.

The men stood firm; Percy gave a quick glance down the line.

"No one hit," he said, sounding breathless. "Too far!"

Grey took one more fast look—good ground, open to the copse. It was a small copse; no chance of a regiment hiding in it. No artillery; if

they'd had cannon, they'd have used it. Retreat or advance? The trail they'd come up was steep and rocky, a sheer drop to the river on one side, thicket on the other; infantry would cut them down, firing from the trailhead.

"They'll move closer. Charge them before they reload." Grey had gathered his reins hastily into one hand as he spoke, preparing to draw his sword.

Instead, he was just in time to grab the reins of Percy's horse, as the latter threw them to him, slid to the ground, and bellowing,

"CHARGE!" at the top of his voice, rushed toward the copse on foot, grappling for the sword at his side.

The company, caught midway in reloading, flung order and caution to the wind, abandoned the openmouthed corporal, and galloped after their lieutenant, roaring enthusiastically.

"Jesus Christ!" Grey said. "Mr. Tarleton—stand fast!" Leaning across, he thrust both sets of reins into the ensign's startled hands, flung himself off, and ran—not after the charging company, but to the side, circling the copse.

He plunged into the trees, pistol in hand, trying to look everywhere at once. His worst fear—that there was a large company inside the copse—was dispelled at once; he caught sight of white uniforms, but no great mass of them. In fact, they seemed to have come upon a foraging party; Grey dodged round a bush and nearly collided with the group of donkeys whose scent had disturbed the horses, the small beasts heavily laden with nets of grass.

One donkey, equally startled, put back its ears, brayed shrilly, and snapped big yellow teeth an inch from his arm. He slapped it smartly across the nose and shoved through the brush, cursing his own idiocy, and that of the French commander, whoever the bloody-minded frog was.

What had possessed the Frenchman to fire on them at such distance? Sense would have been to keep quiet, or retreat unobtrusively through the trees. And why had *he* told Percy the French were coming toward them? More than likely, they had realized their folly and *were* about to retreat, being outnumbered and lightly armed.

As for Percy's idiocy ... he could hear Percy shouting somewhere ahead, hoarse and wildly elated. He had an overpowering desire to punch Lieutenant Wainwright, and hoped no Frenchman would deprive him of the chance to do so by killing Percy first.

A shriek came from his right and he jerked aside as someone charged him. Something tugged at his coat, pulling him off balance. He stumbled, grabbed at a tree branch to keep from falling, and fired by reflex at the man who had just tried to bayonet him.

The French soldier jerked, struck in the side, and turned the incredulous face of a young boy on him before falling. Grey swore silently to himself, teeth clenched as he reloaded. The boy wore a corporal's insignia; chances were that this fourteen-year-old nitwit was the commander of the foraging party.

He thrust the reloaded pistol into his belt, and picked up the musket the young corporal had dropped. The boy was still breathing; Grey could see his chest rise and fall. His eyes were closed, but his face was twitching with pain. Grey stood for an instant, hand on his pistol, then shook his head and turned again toward where he had last heard Percy's voice.

Percy's tactic had been unorthodox in the extreme—to say nothing of contravening every known principle of order and command—but it was amazingly successful. The dumbfounded French soldiers had been taken completely by surprise, and had scattered like geese. Most of them had fled—he could hear crashing at a distance—and the remainder were being efficiently felled by Percy's troops, quite off their heads at the ease of their first victory.

This was madness. The French should surrender at once, while there was something left to save—but of course, he'd just shot their commander; there was probably no one to surrender, or to call for it.

Just as he thought this, someone did. Percy, voice cracked from shouting, was yelling, "Surrender, God damn you! You're beaten, for God's sake, give *up*!" He was shouting in English, of course.

Grey dashed aside a hanging branch, and was just in time to see Percy kill his first man.

A large French soldier feinted deftly to one side with his bayonet, then lunged upward with murderous intent. Percy lunged at the same moment, dropping into a perfect *Passata-sotto*—doubtless by accident, as he'd never been able to do it in practice. He looked completely astonished as the bayonet slid past his ear, and the point of his sword passed cleanly beneath the Frenchman's arm and into his body. The Frenchman looked still more astonished.

Percy let go of the sword, and the Frenchman took three small steps backward, almost daintily, sat down with a thump, and died, still looking surprised. Percy walked away a short distance and vomited into a bush. Grey was watching him, and nearly missed the flicker of movement. He whirled by instinct, already swinging the musket by the barrel. The stock slammed the Frenchman—yes, white, he was French—in the back and knocked him sideways as the Frenchman's own gun went off with a bang and a bloom of black smoke.

Grey threw himself into the smoke and hit the man, shoulder first, fell with him, and rolled in the leaves. Came up gasping, punching, and yelling. Hit the man's face accidentally and felt something crunch in his hand; a shock ran up the bones of his arm and paralyzed it for an instant. The Frenchman's hand struck clawing at his face, caught him in the eye, and as he flinched back, the man twisted under him, seized his arm, and flung him off.

He hit the ground on hip and elbow. Eyes watering, he scrabbled one-handed for his dagger and thrust blindly up with all his strength. Cloth scraped his hand, body warmth and the reek of sweat, and he shoved as hard as he could through tearing cloth, hoping for flesh, fearing the jar of bone.

The man gave a gurgling scream, and staggered back. Grey covered his injured eye with one hand and through a haze of tears made out the Frenchman, doubled over, a dark stain in his crotch spreading beneath his clutching hands. Beyond him stood Percy, mouth open, pistol in hand.

"Will you fucking shoot the bastard?" Grey bellowed.

Like an automaton, Percy raised his pistol and did. He blinked at the sound of the shot, then stood, eyes wide, watching as the Frenchman fell slowly forward, still grasping his crotch, curling in on himself like a dried leaf.

"Thank you," Grey said, and shut his eyes, pressing the heel of his hand hard into the injured socket. Colored pinwheels spun behind his eyelid, but the pain lessened.

After a moment, he took away his hand and rolled onto his hands and knees, where he paused for an instant, steadying himself, before being able to stand.

"Good," he said to Percy, having got up at last. He sneezed and cleared his throat. "That was good."

"Was it?" Percy said faintly.

Both Grey's eyes were streaming and the injured one wouldn't stay open, but he could see well enough to summon the men back and begin to take stock. The French had fled, leaving six dead. The wounded, including the corporal, had either crawled into the brush or been dragged off by their companions; he was not disposed to spend time searching for them. He had Brett make a quick tally; no one injured, bar a slight wound in the thigh to Private Johnston, who was limping cheerfully round going through the pockets of the dead French.

Grey gave brisk orders for retirement—there was no telling how far the foraging party had been from their main company, nor how quickly they might return with reinforcements—and they collected the weapons and left, heading back to camp.



It was nearly dark when Grey returned at last to his tent, having sent out a scouting party, received reports from the regimental captains, waited for the scouting party's report, conferred with Ewart Symington, sent Ensign Brett with stiff remarks to the quartermaster regarding a cask of what purported to be salt beef, but which in fact appeared to be the remains of an extremely elderly horse, made his own report to Hal, and written orders for the next day, all with a wad of damp guncotton pressed over his wounded eye. His head throbbed, his hand hurt, and he was famished, but he felt happy nonetheless.

The same sense of anticipation and excitement that rose within his breast flowed through the camp around him; you could hear it in the scraping of whetstones, the clank of kettles and the singing. Soldiers nearly always sang in camp, save when completely exhausted or dispirited, but what they sang varied, and was a good indication of their feelings. Sentimental ballads and mangled bits of music hall were standard camp fare. Marching songs, not surprisingly, when marching.

But when anticipating battle, the songs tended to the comic and the bawdy, and the snatches he heard as he walked through the camp would have made a sailor blush. The news had spread. The French were close, and the troops smelt blood. He whistled under his breath as he walked.



He found Tom Byrd and Percy in his tent, conversing amiably. Both of

them sprang up at once when they saw him and there was a certain amount of fuss made over the state of his eye, by Percy, and the state of his uniform, by Tom—who, once having satisfied himself that the eye had not actually been gouged out, seemed more concerned with a large tear in the skirt of the coat he had just shed.

"Look!" Tom thrust three fingers through the rent, and waggled them, looking accusingly at Grey. "Gone right through the lining. What's done that, me lord—a sword?"

"I don't recall—oh, yes, I do. It was a bayonet."

Tom inhaled, as though about to say something, but subsided, muttering, and set the coat aside.

"Sit yourself down, me lord," he said, resigned. "I'll fetch a bowl of barley water for your eye."

Grey sank onto a camp stool, surprisingly glad to sit down. Appetizing smells of stew and hot bread drifted through the tent, and his stomach growled; he hadn't eaten since dawn. He hoped Tom would bring supper; the eye could wait a little longer.

"Your men—" he began, only to be stopped by Percy's snort.

"Fed, watered, brushed, curried, and stabled with ribbons braided into their little tails, or rather, getting drunk round the fires—I ordered them an extra ration of beer, was that right?—or slinking off into the bushes with the local whores, but they *have* been fed. Did you think I'd forget them?"

There might have been an edge to this, but it was said lightly, and Grey smiled, tilting his head to look at Percy with his good eye.

"I am quite sure you would overlook no detail of their welfare. I was going to say that they did very well today. They're a credit to you."

Percy flushed up at this, but only said, "Oh. Well, they're a good lot," in an offhanded way. He cleared his throat; he was still hoarse. "None of them much hurt, at least."

"No. And you?"

Percy glanced quickly at him, then away.

"I can't stop shaking," he said, low-voiced. "Does it show?"

"No," Grey said, choosing not to add that given his own present state of vision, he likely wouldn't have noticed had Percy been quaking like egg-pudding in a high wind. He reached out a hand, though, and put it on Percy's arm, which seemed solid enough. "No," he repeated, more strongly. "You aren't. Not to look at."

"Oh," Percy said, and took a deep breath. "It's just inside, then.

Good. What did Melton say?"

Most of Hal's remarks wouldn't bear repeating, but Hal could convey his own opinions to Percy in the morning, by which time Hal would be considerably calmer, and Percy might have stopped shaking.

"Not a lot," Grey said. "Just flesh wounds. Don't worry about it."

They talked of nothing in particular then, taking no great interest in the conversation, only glad to be in each other's company. This went on until Tom came back, carrying a flask of brandywine and a bowl of some cloudy liquid, which he claimed was warm barley water with salt, sovereign for sore eyes.

He handed this to Percy, and disappeared again in search of supper. Grey leaned over the bowl and sniffed it.

"Am I to drink it, do you think? Or pour it over my head?"

"I don't mind what you do with it, but I strongly suggest you don't pour the brandy into your eye. It would sting, I expect. Besides, I need it." Percy poured a generous portion of the latter liquid into a cup and pushed it across the table. He didn't bother finding another cup for himself, but drank directly from the flask, thus giving Grey an idea of just how much he likely was shaking internally.

Grey sipped his own. It wasn't good, but it burned pleasantly, and numbed the annoying pain in his eye a little. Still, he should do something with the barley water; Tom would be offended if he didn't. He groped for the handkerchief in his sleeve, inspected it critically, and decided it would do.

"You meant it, didn't you?" Percy said quietly, putting down the flask.

"Meant what?"

"When you said you were a beast." Percy was looking at him with an expression that seemed somewhere between awe and mild revulsion. Grey didn't care for either.

"So are all soldiers," he said shortly. "All men, for that matter. Get used to it."

Percy made a small huffing sound, which might have been amusement.

"You needn't tell *me* that, my dear," he said dryly. He stood, took the cloth from Grey's hand, and dipped it in the bowl. "Put your head back."

His hand on Grey's neck was warm, his touch delicate.

"Can you open your eye?"

Grey tried, and managed a slit. Percy's face swam in a haze of tears,

dark and intent.

"Not so bad," he murmured. "Here, relax." Percy's fingers spread the lids of his injured eye, and squeezed the liquid from the cloth into it. Grey stiffened a little in reflex, but found that it didn't hurt much, and did relax a little.

"All I meant is that you are a great deal more honest about it than most."

"I doubt it is any virtue." A thought came to him, belatedly. "Are you wondering whether you are sufficiently a beast, yourself? That you acquitted yourself well, I mean? You did. I should have said so."

"You did."

"I did?"

"Yes. You don't remember?"

"No," Grey said, honestly. "I was rather busy."

Percy chuckled, low in his throat, and dipped the cloth again.

"I am sufficiently honest as to acknowledge my own inexperience, at least. You were right, about having no idea what you'll do in battle. Had you not shouted at me to shoot that fellow, I should simply have stood there gaping, until you got up and did it yourself."

Grey opened his mouth to remonstrate, but Percy bent and kissed him quickly on the lips, his breath warm on Grey's water-chilled cheek.

"I don't seek reassurance, my dear, no need." He stood upright and the cloth came over Grey's eyes again, with its soothing flood. "I did not disgrace myself utterly, and perhaps will do better later. I meant only to say that I understand now what you told me. And that at the end of it"—the cloth drew away, and Grey blinked—"the only thing important is that we are still both alive.

"That," he added, his tone offhand as he turned to dip the cloth again, "and that I am proud of you."

Alarmed and stirred by the kiss, deeply embarrassed at the praise—and not a little shocked that Percy did not instinctively perceive the essential truth of the matter—Grey began to say the obvious: it was his duty. But Tom Byrd came in with the supper then, and in the end, he contented himself with no more than a feeble "Thank you."

Chapter 25



Betrayal

In early May, the Duc de Richelieu returned to France, replaced by the Comte de Clermont. The Comte de Clermont, reluctant to engage his troops in spite of their numerical superiority, continued to play at tag through the Rhine Valley. Brunswick, who understood these tactics well enough, continued patiently to answer them, flanking Clermont's sides, blocking an advance here, prodding there—little by little driving Clermont's army back toward the French border.

By late May, it was clear that the French had nowhere left to skip away to; within weeks, perhaps days, they must either turn and fight, or retreat into France with Brunswick baying at their heels. Clearly Clermont would fight.

That being so, Duke Ferdinand wisely chose to take time now to ready his troops and burnish his cannon, wishing to meet the attack, when it came, in a state of maximum readiness.

To this end, Grey spent much of his time in riding to and fro, inspecting companies, taking the reports of company commanders, arguing with quartermasters, giving orders for resupply, refitment where needed, the obtaining of more wagon mules (these in great demand, and thus both scarce and expensive), and the ten thousand other details that fell to a major's daily lot.

The only good thing about this process, Grey reflected, heading back toward the small village where he was presently quartered, was that he had no more than the ninety seconds between the time his head hit the pillow and his falling asleep, in which to experience sexual frustration. The ninety seconds were required in which to administer such palliative action as was possible; otherwise, he would be asleep in three.

He uncorked his canteen and drank deeply; it was a warm day in late spring, and the water seemed to taste not only of the tin and beechwood canteen, but of rising sap, half sweet and pungent. The Drachenfels loomed before him—the "Dragon's Rock," that stony peak on the shore of the Rhine, where Siegfried was said to have slain his dragon—romantically wreathed in river haze, its foot a-welter in greening vineyards.

The spring weather was affecting everyone; men walked dreamily into walls on sentry duty, put down their muskets and forgot them in the fields, took French leave and were found lazing under hedgerows or haystacks, often curled about a woman.

Grey might have thought it unfair that he was unable to do likewise—but he remembered his first campaign, when he and Hector had stolen away to find solitude and sweetness in nests of spring grass under skies that spun with stars, the heat of their young bodies more than compensating for the chill of the evenings. Rank had its privileges, but it undeniably had its drawbacks, as well. At least he did have the pleasure of Percy's company most evenings, if not the freedom to employ it fully.

Sighing, he corked the canteen and looked about for Richard Brett, the ensign accompanying him. Brett was the youngest of the ensigns, only fifteen, and normally bright and industrious, but suffering particularly from the effects of springtime—on account of his youth, Grey supposed.

At the moment, Brett was nowhere in sight, though his horse grazed contentedly along the lush green verge of the road, reins hanging. Nudging his own mount in that direction, Grey discovered an open gate in the wall of a farmhouse, and inside it, Mr. Brett, elbows leaned upon the coping of a well and his gaze fixed worshipfully upon the young woman who was hauling a bucket out of it, smiling at him.

The fact that Brett spoke no German and the young woman plainly had no English obviously posed no bar to an exchange of sentiments; the body had its own language.

Resigned but generous, Grey dismounted, letting his own horse graze as well. "Ten minutes, Mr. Brett," he called, and walking a little way off the road, found a grassy spot and lay down with his hat over his eyes.

The ground was warm beneath him, the sun warm above, and he felt bone and muscle melt, the tight-coiled springs of his mind relax like an unwound watch. He made a vain attempt to keep hold of the dozen things he should be paying attention to, but then gave up. It was spring.



It was still spring come evening, and Grey came back to the village

thinking of doorknobs. One, in particular. Tom had secured him a small room at the top of the local *Gasthof*; small, but with a door that locked, a most unusual facility in such parts.

Or rather, the door *had* a lock. The key for it had not yet been found, but Grey was assured it existed, and would doubtless resurface momentarily.

Meanwhile, the doorknob—made of white china and slick as an egg—as though to compensate for the loss of the key, was inclined either to spin loosely round on its stem, or to jam fast, both conditions preventing the door from being opened from the outside. More than once, Tom had been obliged to go through the window of the adjoining garret, and worm across the front of the house in order to slide into the window of Grey's room and open the door from the inside.

There was an entertainment scheduled for tonight, a concert of sorts, with local dances performed, in the next village over. Most of the men and all of the officers in the area would be there, making the most of the mild weather and their temporary freedom. Given the obliging nature of his doorknob, Grey thought that perhaps he and Percy might make the most of the occasion, as well. A brief appearance at the festivities, and in the darkness, everyone well-laced with flowing wine, no one would notice if they left—separately for the sake of discretion—and slipped back to the inn.

The sun had begun to sink, washing the old walled *Gasthof* and its orchard in a haze of peach and apricot as he rode into the paved courtyard at the trot, his horse eager for home and hay.

Grey was feeling no less eager, and was not particularly pleased to be stopped in the courtyard by a Captain Custis, from the 9th, who hailed him as he dismounted.

"Hoy, Grey!"

"Custis." He nodded to the ostler and gave over his horse, turning to see what the captain wanted. "Were you wanting me?"

"Not so you'd notice," Custis said cheerfully. "Colonel Jeffreys says you promised to lend him your copy of Virgil, so I said I'd fetch it for him, as I was bound this way on an errand. As I was waiting for you, though, I found myself in conversation with *Herr* Hauptmann here"—he nodded at a small, dapper Prussian captain of infantry, who bowed and clicked his heels—"and fancy my surprise to hear that there's a Maifest on in the next village tonight!"

"Fancy that," Grey said, unable to repress a smile. He glanced at the

brilliant horizon, where peach was deepening into coral and lavender. "And of course it will be too late for you to ride back to camp tonight after you get the book, so you'll have to stay on. Pity, that."

"Yes, isn't it. You're going?"

"Oh, yes. Bit later, though; I've orders to write first."

"Hauptmann and I will save you a wineskin. But I mustn't forget the colonel's book."

"Right, I'll get it."

Custis and Hauptmann followed him up the narrow stair, discussing with some animation the virtues of a local vineyard, located at the foot of the Drachenfels.

"Federweisser, they call the new, uncasked wine. 'Feather-white,' and it is, too—white, very light—but by God! Three glasses, and you're under the table."

"You're under the table, perhaps," Grey said, laughing. "Speak for yourself."

"It is somewhat strong," Hauptmann said. "But you must drink the *Federweisser* with the *Zwiebelkuchen* that they make there also. That way, you do not suffer—"

Grey grasped the china knob, which turned properly for once, and pushed the door open. And stood paralyzed for an instant, before jerking it shut.

Not quite fast enough, though. Not fast enough to have prevented Custis and Hauptmann from seeing, over his shoulder. Not nearly fast enough to obliterate the image that reached his own eyes and burned directly through them into his brain: the sight of Percy, naked and facedown on the bed, being split like a buttered bun by a blond German officer, also naked, his pale buttocks clenched with effort.

Someone had given a cry of shock; he couldn't tell whether it was Custis, Hauptmann, or himself. Perhaps it was Percy. Not the other man; he had been too intent on his business, eyes shut and face contorted in the ecstasy of approaching climax.

Weber. The name floated through Grey's mind like an echo and vanished, leaving it completely blank.



Everything thereafter seemed to happen with remarkable slowness. His thoughts were like clockwork, clicking from one to the next with

dispassionate quick logic, while everyone—himself included—seemed to move with a cumbersome sluggishness, turning slowly toward each other and away, the changing expressions of shock, bewilderment, horror flowing like cold treacle over faces that all looked suddenly alike.

You are the senior officer present, said the small, cold voice in his head, taking note of the confusion. You must act.

Things abruptly resumed their normal speed; voices and footsteps were coming from everywhere, attracted by the cry, the slam of the door. Puzzled faces, murmured questions, excited whispers, English and German. He stepped forward and rapped on the door, once, sharply, and the voices behind him hushed abruptly. On the other side of the door there was a deafening silence.

"Get dressed, please," he said very calmly through the wooden panel. "Present yourselves in the courtyard in five minutes." He stepped back, looked at the gathering crowd, and picked one of his ensigns' faces out of the swimming throng.

"Fetch two guards, Mr. Brett. To the courtyard, at the double."

He became dimly aware of a hand on his arm, and blinking once, turned to Custis.

"I'll do it," Custis said, low-voiced. "You needn't. You mustn't, Grey. Not your own brother."

The horrified sympathy in Custis's eyes was like the prick of a needle, rousing him from numbness.

"No," he said, his own voice sounding strange. "No, I have to—"

"You mustn't," Custis repeated, urgent. He pushed Grey, halfturning him. "Go. For God's sake, go. It will make things worse if you stay."

He swallowed, and became aware of all the faces lining the stairway, staring. Of just how much worse the gossip would be, that extra touch of scandal, the *frisson* of horror, the *schadenfreude*, as word spread that he had been obliged to arrest his own brother for the crime of sodomy.

"Yes," he said. He swallowed again, whispered, "Thank you," and walked away, going down the stairs, counting the wooden treads as they flickered past beneath the toes of his boots, one, two, three, four ...

Went on counting his steps, ringing sudden on the bricks of the courtyard, one, two, three, four ... muffled as he passed the gate, walking on strewn hay and wet earth, saw Brett and the guards

coming toward him, raised a hand in acknowledgment but did not stop, one, two, three, four ...

Walked straight down the main street of the village, heedless of mud, of horse dung, of screaming children and barking dogs, eyes fixed on the crag of the Drachenfels, rising in the distance. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven ...

Chapter 26



Drinking with Dachshunds

Both men were turned over to the commanding officers of their respective regiments. Hal was at headquarters with Duke Ferdinand; in his absence, Percy was given over to the custody of Ewart Symington; Lieutenant Weber, the Hanoverian, was sent to the Graf von Namtzen's representative.

Symington, with more tact than Grey would have given him credit for, didn't mention Percy to him, and had evidently given orders that no one else should, either. The fact that no one spoke to him of Percy didn't mean that no one spoke of Percy, of course. The army was idle, awaiting a new round of orders from Brunswick. Idleness bred gossip, and Grey found the sudden cessation of conversations, the looks—ranging from sympathy to disgust—and the averted eyes of both men and officers so disquieting that he took to spending the days alone in his tent—he would not return to the inn—though it was by turns stifling or drafty.

Had he been in command, he would have had the men on the move—marching from point A to point B on daily drill, if necessary, but moving. Soldiers took to sloth like pigs to mud, and while such idleness was good for trade, from the points of view of local tavern keepers and prostitutes, it bred vice, disease, disorderliness, and violence among the troops.

But Grey was not in command, and the English troops sat, sunning themselves as the days slowly lengthened toward Midsummer Day. Dicing, drinking, whoring—and gossiping.

With no company save Tom and his own thoughts, which trudged in a weary circle from rage through fear to guilt and back again, Grey was left no social outlet save the occasional game of chess with Symington, who was an indifferent player at best.

Finally, unable to stand the growing sense of being mired hip-deep in something noxious, Grey in desperation asked Symington for leave. Stephan von Namtzen, the Graf von Erdberg, was a personal friend; Grey had been seconded to the Graf's regiment the year before, as English liaison officer. Von Namtzen's regiment was with Brunswick's troops, but the Graf himself had not yet come to the field; presumably he was still recovering at his hunting lodge, a place called Waldesruh. Only a day's ride from the present English position.

Grey wasn't sure whether his request for leave had more to do with his need to escape from the morass of silent accusation and speculation that surrounded him, the need of distraction from his own thoughts, or from a basely jealous urge to discover more about Percy's partner in crime and his fate. But Stephan von Namtzen was a good friend, and above all at the moment, Grey felt the need of a friend.

Symington granted his request without hesitation, and with Tom loyally in tow, he set off for Waldesruh.



Waldesruh was a hunting lodge—which by Hanoverian standards, probably meant that it employed fewer than a hundred servants. The place was surrounded by mile upon mile of brooding forest, and despite the continued weight on his mind and heart, Grey felt a sense of relief as he and Tom emerged at last from the woodland shadows into the sunlight of Waldesruh's exquisitely manicured grounds.

"Oi," said Tom approvingly. The lodge, three-storied and built of the pale brown native stone with brick touches in red and green, spread itself before them, elegant and colorful as a pheasant. "Does himself well, the captain, for a Hun. Do you suppose the princess is here, too?" he asked hopefully.

"Possibly," Grey said. "You must refer to him as the Graf von Erdberg, here at his home, Tom. 'Captain' is his military title, for the field. Should you speak to him directly, say, 'Herr Graf.' And for God's sake—"

"Aye, aye, don't call them Huns where they can hear." Tom did not quite roll his eyes, but assumed a martyred air. "What's a Graf, then, did you say?"

"A landgrave. 'Count' would be the English equivalent of the title." He nudged his horse and they started slowly up the winding drive toward the house.

Grey hoped the Princess Louisa—now the Gräfin von Erdberg—wasn't to home, despite Tom's obvious eagerness to renew his acquaintance with the princess's body servant, Ilse. He didn't know what the nature of von Namtzen's marriage might be, but it would be much easier to talk with Stephan von Namtzen without the prolonged

social pourparlers that the princess's presence would necessarily entail.

Still, if she were a devoted wife, she might well feel it incumbent upon her to hover over her wounded husband, tenderly nursing him back to health. Grey tried to envision the Princess Louisa von Lowenstein engaging in this sort of behavior, failed, and dismissed it from mind. God, if she were here, he hoped that at least she hadn't brought her unspeakable mother-in-law.

A small, grubby face popped out of the foliage just ahead of them, blinked in surprise, then popped back in. Shouts and excited rustlings announced their arrival, and a groom was already hurrying round the house to take charge of Tom and the horses by the time they reached the flagged steps.

Wilhelm, Stephan's butler, greeted Grey at the door, his long face lighting with pleasure. A number of dogs surged out with him, barking and wagging with delight as they smelt this new and interesting object.

"Lord John! Willkommen, willkommen! You will eat?"

"I will," Grey assured him, smiling and patting the nearest furry head. "I am famished. Perhaps I should make my presence known to your master first, though? Or your mistress, should she be at home," he added, for the sake of politeness, for the presence of the dogs assured him that the princess was not here.

A pained look crossed Wilhelm's features at mention of his employers.

"The Princess Louisa is at Schloss Lowenstein. The Graf ... yes, I will send word to the Graf at once. Of course," he said, but with a sort of hesitancy that caused Grey to glance sharply at him.

"What is wrong?" he asked directly. "Is it that the Graf is still unwell? Is he unfit to receive company?"

"Oh, he is ... well enough," the butler replied, though in such uncertain tones that Grey felt some alarm. He noticed also that Wilhelm didn't answer his second question, instead merely gesturing to Grey to follow him.

Had he harbored any doubts regarding the princess's residency, they would have disappeared the moment he stepped across the threshold. The lodge was immaculately clean, but still held the pleasantly frowsty air of a bachelor establishment, smelling of dogs, tobacco, and brandywine.

A pair of mud-caked boots was visible through a parlor door, flung askew on the hearth—a good sign, he thought; Stephan must be

somewhat recovered, if he were riding—and a small heap of stones, scraps of paper, pencil stubs, detached buttons, grubby bread crusts, coins, and other detritus recognizable as the contents of a man's pockets was turned out on a silver salver which elsewhere might be intended for visiting cards.

Speaking of which ...

"Has the Graf entertained many visitors since his unfortunate accident?" he inquired.

Wilhelm cast a rather hunted glance back over one shoulder and shook his head, but didn't elaborate.

Not such a good sign; Stephan was normally a most sociable gentleman.

The butler paused at the foot of the staircase, as though trying to make up his mind about something.

"You are tired from your journey, *mein Herr*? I could show you to your room," Wilhelm offered, making no move to do so.

"Not at all," Grey replied promptly, taking up the obvious cue. "Perhaps you would have the kindness to take me to the Graf? I would like to give him my respects at once."

"Oh, yes, sir!" Palpable relief spread over Wilhelm's countenance, causing Grey to wonder afresh what the devil von Namtzen had been doing.

He had not long to wonder. Wilhelm shut the dogs in the kitchen, then escorted him, almost at the trot, through the lodge and out a door at the rear, whereupon they plunged into the forest and made their way along a pleasant, shady trail. In the distance ahead, Grey could hear shouts—he recognized Stephan von Namtzen's voice, raised in displeasure—and a remarkable thunder of hooves and ... wheels?

"Was ist—" he began, but Wilhelm shook his head decidedly, and beckoned him on.

Grey rounded the next curve of the path on Wilhelm's heels and found himself on the edge of an enormous clearing, floored with sand. And rushing directly toward him, screaming like an eagle and wildeyed as his horses, was what appeared to be one of the ancient German gods of war, driving a chariot drawn by four galloping dark horses, scarlet-mouthed and foaming.

Grey flung himself to the side, taking the butler to the ground with him, and the chariot slewed past with barely an inch to spare, a flurry of monstrous hooves spraying them with sand and droplets of saliva. "Jesus!"

The quadriga—yes, by God, it was; the four horses ran abreast, threatening at every moment to overturn the chariot that bounced like a pebble in their wake—galloped on, held in perilous check by the one-armed maniac who stood upright behind them, a terrified groom with a whip beside him, clinging with one hand to the chariot and with the other to the Graf von Namtzen.

Grey rose slowly to his feet, staring and wiping sand from his face. They weren't going to make the turn.

"Slow down!" he bellowed, but it was much too late, even had they heard him over the thunder of the equipage. The chariot's left wheel rose, touched sand, skipped free again, and to a chorus of shouts and screams, left the ground altogether as the horses scrambled, getting in each other's way as they slewed uncontrolled and leaning into the turn.

The chariot fell sideways, spilling out its contents in a jumble of flailing limbs, and the horses, reins trailing, galloped on a few more steps before stumbling to a shuddering halt, fragments of the shattered chariot strewn behind them.

"Jesus," Grey said again, finding no better remark. The two figures were struggling in the sand. The one-armed man lost his balance and fell; the groom tried to grasp his other arm, to help, and was cursed at for his trouble.

At Grey's side, Wilhelm crossed himself.

"We are so glad you have come, *mein Herr*," he said, voice trembling. "We didn't know what to do."



And you think I do? Grey thought later, in silent reply. The groom had been bundled off with a broken arm, a doctor sent for, and the horses—fortunately uninjured—seen to and stabled. The erstwhile charioteer had cavalierly dismissed a large swelling over one eye and a wrenched knee and greeted Grey with the utmost warmth, embracing him and kissing him upon both cheeks before limping off toward the house, calling for food and drink, his one arm draped about Grey's shoulders.

They sat now sprawled in chairs before the fire, awaiting dinner, surrounded by a prostrate pack of heavily breathing dogs, their

patience sustained by a plate of savories and a decanter of excellent brandy. A spurious sense of peace prevailed, but Grey was not fooled.

"Have you quite lost your mind, Stephan?" he inquired politely.

Von Namtzen appeared to consider the question, inhaling the aroma of his brandy.

"No," he said mildly, exhaling. "Why do you ask?"

"For one thing, your servants are terrified. You might have killed that groom, you know. To say nothing of breaking your own neck."

Von Namtzen regarded Grey over his glass, mouth lifting a little.

"You, of course, have never fallen from a horse. And how is my dear friend Karolus?"

Grey made a sound of reluctant amusement.

"Bursting with health. And how is the Princess Louisa? Oh—I am sorry," he said, seeing von Namtzen's face change. "Be so kind as to forget I asked."

Stephan made a dismissive gesture, and reached for the decanter.

"She is also bursting," he said wryly. "With child."

"My dear fellow!" Grey was sincerely pleased, and would have wrung Stephan's hand in congratulation, had there been one to spare. As it was, he contented himself with raising his glass in salute. "To your good fortune, and the continued health of your family!"

Von Namtzen raised his own glass, looking mildly embarrassed, but pleased.

"She is the size of a tun of rum," he said modestly.

"Excellent," Grey said, hoping this was a suitable response, and refilled both their glasses.

That explained the absence of the princess and the children, then; Louisa would presumably want to remain with the ancient Dowager Princess von Lowenstein, her first husband's mother—though God knew why.

There was a bowl of flowers on the table. Chinese chrysanthemums, the color of rust, glowing in the setting sun. An odd thing to find in a hunting lodge, but von Namtzen loved flowers—or had used to. He pushed the bowl carelessly aside now, and a little water slopped on the table. Von Namtzen ignored it, reaching for a decanter on the tray. His left shoulder jerked, the missing hand reaching instinctively for his glass, and a spasm of irritation touched his face.

Grey leaned forward hastily and seized the glass, holding it for von Namtzen to pour. The smell of brandy rose sweet and stinging in his nose, a counterpoint to the clean, bitter scent of the flowers. He handed the glass to von Namtzen, and with a murmured "Salut," took a generous swallow of his own.

He eyed the level of brandy in the decanter, thinking that as things looked, they were likely to need it before the evening was out. Von Namtzen outwardly was still a large, bluntly handsome man; the injury had not diminished him, though his face was thinner and more lined. But Grey was aware that something had changed; von Namtzen's usual sense of imperturbable calm, his fastidiousness and formality had gone, leaving a rumpled stranger whose inner agitation showed clearly, a man cordial and snappish by turns.

"Don't fuss," von Namtzen said curtly to his butler, who had come in and was endeavoring to brush dirt from his clothes. "Go away, and take the dogs."

Wilhelm gave Grey a long-suffering look that said, *You see?*, then clicked his tongue, urging the dogs away to the kitchen again. One remained behind, though, sprawled indolently on the hearthrug. Wilhelm tried to make it follow him, as well, but von Namtzen waved him away.

"Gustav can stay."

Wilhelm rolled his eyes, and muttering something uncomplimentary in which the name "Gustav" featured, went out with the other dogs wagging at his heels.

Hearing his name, the dog lifted his head and yawned, exhibiting a delicately muscular, long pink tongue. The hound—Grey thought it was a hound, from the ears and muzzle—rolled to its feet and trotted over to von Namtzen, tail gently wagging.

"What on earth is *that*?" Grey laughed, charmed, and the strained atmosphere eased a little.

It was not, Grey supposed, more ridiculous than Doctor Rigby's pug—and at least this dog was not wearing a suit. It was impossible to regard the creature without smiling, though.

It was a hound of some sort, black and disproportionately longbodied, with legs so stumpy that they appeared to have been amputated. With large, liquid eyes and a sturdy long tail in constant motion, it resembled nothing so much as an exceedingly amiable sausage.

"Where did you get him?" Grey asked, leaning down and offering his knuckles to the dog, who sniffed him with interest, the tail wagging faster.

"He is of my own breeding—the best I have obtained so far." Von

Namtzen spoke with obvious pride, and Grey forbore to pass any remark regarding what the rest of the Graf's attempts must look like.

"He is ... amazing robust, is he not?"

Von Namtzen beamed at his appreciation, irritability forgotten, and scooped the dog up awkwardly in his one arm, displaying the dog's expanse of hairless belly and a tremendous chest, deep-keeled and muscular.

"He is bred to dig, you see." Von Namtzen took one of the stubby front paws, broad and thick-nailed, and waggled it in illustration.

"I do see. To dig what? Worms?"

Von Namtzen and Gustav regarded each other fondly, ignoring this. Then the dog began to squirm, and von Namtzen set him gently on the floor.

"He is marvelous," the Graf said. "Completely fearless and extremely fierce in battle. But very gentle, as you see."

"Battle?" Grey bent to peer more closely at the dog, which promptly turned to him and, still wagging, gave a sudden massive heave which ended with the stumpy paws perched on his knees, the long muzzle sniffing interestedly at his face. He laughed and stroked the dog, only now noticing the healed scars that ran over the massive shoulders.

"What on earth has he been fighting? Cocks?"

"Dachse," von Namtzen said, with immense satisfaction. "Badgers." He is bred most particularly to hunt badgers."

Gustav had tired of perching on his hind legs; he collapsed onto the floor and rolled onto his back, presenting a vast pink belly to be scratched, still wagging his tail. Grey obliged, raising a brow; the hound seemed so amiable as to appear almost feeble-minded.

"Badgers, you say. Has he ever killed one?"

"More than a dozen. I will show you the skins tomorrow."

"Really?" Grey was impressed. He had met a few badgers, and knew of nothing—including human beings—willing to engage with one; the badger's reputation for ferocity was extremely well founded.

"Really." Von Namtzen poured a fresh glass, paused for no more than an instant to sniff the vapor of the brandy, then tossed it back in a manner unfitting the quality of the drink. He swallowed, coughed, and was obliged to set down the glass in order to thump himself on the chest. "He is bred to go to ground," he wheezed, eyes watering as he nodded at the dog. "He will go straight into a badger sett, and do battle with them there, in their own house."

"Must be the devil of a shock to the badgers."

That made Stephan laugh. For an instant, the tension left his face, and for the first time since his arrival, Grey caught a real glimpse of the friend he had known.

Heartened by this, he topped up Stephan's glass. He thought of suggesting a hand of cards after supper—he had found that cards usually soothed a troubled mind, provided one did not play for money —but on second thought, forbore. Stephan could doubtless manage to play well enough, but the actions involved were bound to emphasize his disability. As it was, Grey tried to avoid staring at the empty sleeve that fluttered limply whenever von Namtzen moved. The shoulder and the curve of the upper arm were still intact, he noted; the amputation seemed to have been done somewhere above the elbow.

Watching Stephan relax by degrees over their casual supper of eggs, *Wurst*, and toasted *Brötchen*, Grey found himself reluctant to bring up the true subject of his visit. Whether it were the loss of the arm, something to do with the Princess Louisa—for he noticed that von Namtzen barely mentioned her, though he spoke of his children with evident fondness—or something else, it was plain that Wilhelm had reason to be worried for his master.

Still, whatever was troubling Stephan, his own matter would have to be dealt with—and time was short. Was it better, Grey wondered, lighting a pipe for Stephan and handing it across, to wait 'til the morrow? Or would it be easier for both of them if he were to speak now, when the warmth of friendship renewed and the intimacy of oncoming night might cushion the harsh edges of the matter? That, and a fair amount of alcohol; they had shared a bottle of hock with supper, and the decanter now held a bare half inch.

He decided to wait just a bit longer, unsure whether this decision was the counsel of prudence or of cowardice. He poured the last of the excellent brandy, taking care to fill his own glass no more than halfway. Kept the conversation light, going from dogs and hunting to minor news from his cousin Olivia's last letter, and amusing stories from the field. He felt the rawness of his own emotions begin to numb, his thoughts of Percy recede to a tolerable distance, and decided that it had been prudence after all.

It was getting on for midsummer, and the sky stayed light far into the night. Through an increasing sense of muzziness, Grey heard the carriage clock strike ten. Wilhelm had come in a little while before to light the candles and refill the decanter, but he could still see von Namtzen's face by the fading light from the window.

The broad planes of it were calm now, though harsh lines that hadn't been there the year before cut deep from nose to mouth. The mouth itself had gone from its normal sweet firmness to a line whose grimness relaxed only when Grey succeeded in making him laugh. Grey had a sudden impulse to reach across, cup Stephan's beard-bristled cheek in his hand, and try to smooth those lines away with a thumb. He resisted the impulse, and let Stephan fill his glass again. Soon. He would have to speak soon—while he could still talk.

"The moon is nearly dark," Stephan remarked, nodding toward the window, where the faint sickle of the waning moon shone in a lavender sky above the wood. "The badgers come more often from their setts at the dark of the moon. We will take Gustav out tomorrow night, perhaps. You will stay some days, *ja*?"

Grey shook his head, preparing himself.

"Only a day or two, alas. I have actually come on an unpleasant errand, I fear."

Stephan's gray eyes were slightly unfocused by this time, but he lifted his head from a contemplation of his own newly filled glass and turned a face of curiosity and owlish sympathy on Grey.

"Oh, ja? Was denn?"

"Ober-Lieutenant Weber," Grey said, hoping that he sounded casual. "Michael Weber." The name felt strange, repellent on his tongue, and he fought back the unwelcome recollections that struck him when he heard or spoke Weber's name: the vision of Weber's muscular, pumping, pale backside, the rumpled fawn breeches on the floor—and the usual hot surge of anger that accompanied that vision. "I wished to speak with him—if you have no objection."

Von Namtzen frowned. Shook his head, swallowing, and grimaced as though the liquor hurt his throat.

"You do object?" Grey raised a brow.

Stephan shook his head again and set down his glass, wiping the back of his hand across his lips.

"He's dead." The words came out hoarsely, and he shook his head again and cleared his throat explosively, repeating more clearly, "er ist tot."

Grey had heard him the first time.

"What happened?" he asked. His heart had seized up at von Namtzen's words, and started again with a painful lurch.

Von Namtzen reached for the decanter, though his glass was still

nearly full.

"I shot him," he said, very quietly.

"You—" Grey choked off his exclamation, and took a deep breath. "How?" he asked, as evenly as he could. "I mean—you executed him? Personally?"

"No." It was not overwarm in the room, but a dew of sweat had formed along Stephan's jaw; Grey saw the sheen of it as he turned his head away, groping for the decanter.

"You must understand. He would have been executed—hanged, had he been court-martialed. The family would have been disgraced, utterly, and there are other sons in the army—they would be ruined. I ... have known the family for a long time. His father is my friend. Michael ..." He rubbed his hand fiercely over his lips. "I knew this boy, knew him from the day of his birth."

Gustav, sensing distress in his master, got up and padded over to sit by von Namtzen's foot, leaning heavily against his leg in an attempt to give comfort. Grey wished momentarily that he could act in such a straightforwardly sympathetic manner, but the best he could do at the moment was to keep silence.

Von Namtzen met his eyes directly for the first time, the depths of his wretchedness apparent in the bloodshot whites and swollen rims.

"I could not let such a thing happen to him—to his family." He took a deep breath, his hand clutching his glass as though for support. "And so I took him from the gaol where he was, saying that I would bring him to his village. On the way, we met with a company of French foragers—I knew where they were; my scouts had told me. There was a skirmish; I had given Michael back his pistol and sword—I ordered him to take his men and fall upon the enemy."

Stephan fell silent, all too clearly reliving the event.

"He knew, do you think?" Grey asked, quietly. "What you intended?"

Stephan nodded, slowly.

"He knew he was to die. I saw the thought kindle in his mind as we rode. He seized it then, let it burn in him. I saw, when it took him. You know it—that moment when a man throws everything away and there is nothing left but *der Kriegswahn*?" It was not a term with an exact English equivalent; "the madness of battle," perhaps. Not waiting for Grey's nod, he went on.

"The men knew, too. They had treated him with contempt, but at this order, they came together at once behind him, the picture of loyalty. Michael was a good soldier always—very brave. But this ... He lifted his sword and charged toward the French, standing in his stirrups, screaming, all his men pouring after him. I have not before seen such ferocity, such courage, and I have seen much of such things. *Er war ... ein Prachtkerl*," he ended, so softly that Grey barely made out the final word.

Glorious, it meant; radiantly beautiful. And in the sense of intimacy that comes with mutual drunkenness, Grey felt he saw the man for an instant as Stephan had, glorious in his rush toward destruction, his warrior's end—and beneath this, Stephan's more personal sense of his beauty as a man; mortal, fleeting.

That gave him a deep pang, the sharp point of his own jealousy blunted by this final picture of the lovely boy, this Weber whose fallen-angel's face he had seen so briefly, embracing Stephan's gift of a noble death.

Von Namtzen let go of his brandy glass and leaned down clumsily to pat the dog, who moaned in his throat and licked his master's hand.

"But he was not killed," he said bleakly, his great blond head still bent over the dog. "Not even wounded."

He raised his head then, but would not look at Grey; his eyes fixed on the bowl of chrysanthemums, gone the color of dried blood in the shadows of the night-darkening room.

"He led his men well, killed three French with his own hand, and routed them completely. He stood quite alone for an instant then at the edge of a wood, all his men gone on in pursuit. And then ... he turned to look at me."

With a look of such terror, such despair, that von Namtzen had found himself fumbling for his own pistol, spurring his horse toward Michael, almost by reflex, so strong was the need to answer that wordless cry.

"I passed a few feet before him, and shot him in the heart. No one saw. I got down and picked him up in my arms; his clothes were damp, his flesh was still hot from the battle."

Stephan closed his eyes. He released a sigh that came from his bones, and seemed to deflate, his broad frame collapsing.

"And so I put him across his saddle and took him home to his mother," he said flatly. "A dead hero, to be mourned and celebrated. Not a disgraced sodomite, whose name could never be spoken by his family." There was silence then, broken only by the sounds of a startled woodcock calling in the forest. Then an owl hooted, somewhere near, and its silent shadow passed the window, part of the gathering night.

Grey wished to speak, but anger and brandy and grief—for Weber, for Percy, for von Namtzen, and not least for himself—seized in his throat, bitter as the smell of the Chinese flowers.

"Er war ein Prachtkerl," Stephan muttered suddenly again, lowvoiced and choked. Pushing back his chair, he lurched to his feet and blundered from the room, his loose sleeve a-flutter, almost stumbling over the dog in his haste.

Gustav snorted in surprise and hopped to his feet, tail waving slowly as he hesitated, not sure whether to follow.

"Here," said Grey, seeing the dog's puzzlement. His voice came thick, and he cleared his throat, repeating, "Hier, Gustav," and held out a bit of cold wurst. "You should like it. You look very much like a sausage yourself, you know," he said, and immediately felt sorry for the insult.

"Entschuldigung," he murmured in apology, but Gustav had taken no offense, and accepted the tidbit with grace, tail gently wagging to and fro, to and fro.

Grey watched this oscillation for a moment, then closed his eyes, feeling dizzy. He should call Wilhelm. He should go to bed. He should ... The thought drifted away unformed. He crossed his arms on the table before him and laid his head upon them.

He was very drunk, and only half conscious of his body. All the same, his eyes burned and his joints ached, as though some ague was come upon him. He wished dimly that he could find relief in weeping, but with all he had drunk, his body was parched, his throat dry and sticky, and he felt obscurely that he did not deserve such relief.

A soft weight leaned against his leg, and the dog's breath warmed the flesh of his calf. He reached down blindly with one hand, and stroked the silky head, over and over, breathing the strong musky smell of the animal, the motion keeping thought at bay until brandy and fatigue assumed that duty and his body relaxed. He dimly felt the wood of the table beneath his cheek, and heard the owl again, hooting in the dark.

When Tom Byrd came to find him, he was sound asleep, Gustav the dachshund on the floor beside him, a long watchful muzzle resting on his boot.



The badger's sett was within a mile of the lodge, the gamekeeper assured them, and so they walked through the woods, enjoying the mildness of the evening. So near to summer, the sun remained in the sky well past nine, and so their badger hunt was conducted in a dim, glowing light that made Grey feel as though they were on an expedition to capture elves or faeries, rather than a ferocious small animal.

Nothing had been said between himself and von Namtzen during the day, but the awareness that there were things to be said hung between them. Still, the gamekeeper and his son walked nearby, keeping an eye on Gustav, who trotted stolidly along, long nose lifted to the scents of the evening air, and so such talk as there was dealt with small, impersonal matters.

He had not known quite what to expect of a badger hunt. The gamekeeper had partially excavated the sett, which lay in the side of a hill, so that the mouth of a dark tunnel was visible. Gustav began to quiver with excitement as the wind changed, bearing a scent so pungently pronounced that even Grey's feeble nose perceived it.

The dog's hackles rose all down his back, and he began to growl enthusiastically, then to bark, as though in challenge to the badger. If a badger was in residence, it failed to emerge, though, and at von Namtzen's sign, the gamekeeper loosed the dog, who shot for the tunnel's entrance, paused for a moment to dig madly, dirt flying from the stubby paws, and then wriggled his broad shoulders into the earth and disappeared from view, tail stiff with excitement.

Sounds of snuffling and scratching came from the hole, and Grey suffered a moment's nightmare, imagining what it must be like to go forward into darkness, enclosed, engulfed, swallowed by the earth, with the knowledge of teeth and fury lurking somewhere ahead, invisible.

He said something of this to von Namtzen, who laughed.

"Dogs, fortunately, are not hampered by imagination," he assured Grey. "They live in the moment. No fear of the future."

This attitude held an obvious appeal—but as Grey noted, some of its benefit depended upon what was happening at the particular moment. Just now, Gustav appeared to be experiencing a moment with an angry badger in it, and von Namtzen, burdened with imagination, seemed to fear the worst, clutching Grey's arm with his

one good hand and muttering German curses and exhortations, mixed with prayers.

Some one of these incantations must have proved effective, for after a heart-stopping period of silence, something moved at the entrance to the tunnel, and Gustav made his way slowly out of the bowels of the earth, dragging the body of his enemy.

The dog was allowed to disembowel his prey and roll on the gory remains in celebration, before being carried off in triumph by the gamekeeper to have a torn ear mended, leaving Grey and von Namtzen to follow as they would.

The sun had finally sunk below the trees, but the last of the fading light still washed the sky with a brilliant gold. It would be gray within moments, but for the space of a heartbeat, the branches of the forest were etched black against it, each twig, each leaf distinct and beautiful.

Grey and von Namtzen stood watching it, both struck for an instant. Grey heard Stephan's breath leave him in a sigh, as the light began to fail.

"This is my favorite time of the day," Stephan said.

"Really? You do not find it melancholy?"

"No, not at all. Everything is quiet. I feel ... alone."

"Allein?" Grey asked, as von Namtzen had spoken in English. "Allein oder einsam?" Alone, meaning "lonely," or "in peace"—solitary?

"Allein. In Ruhe," von Namtzen answered, smiling a little. "I am busy always in the daylight, and in the evening, there are the people —official banquets, entertainments. But no one wishes me to do anything while the light falls. You like this?" He nodded at the prospect before them. They had emerged from the forest at the crest of a small hill, not far from the lodge. Waldesruh and its stable lay a little below them, their solid lines gone soft with twilight, so that the lodge seemed about to vanish into the earth and be covered over by the trees, flowing dark and silent down from the slope behind it.

Grey might have found the thought that everything might vanish and they be left alone to face night in the forest somewhat daunting. At the moment, though, he recognized Stephan's wistfulness, and shared it. To be quite alone, to lay one's burdens at the feet of the trees, and lose them—if only for a moment—in the deepening shadows there.

"Ja," he said. "Wunderschön." Yes, he had a liking.

They stood for several minutes then, not speaking. Watching the

last trace of color fade from the sky, the lacework of the branches begin to blur and merge with the dark as night crept ineluctably upward from the earth.

"So," von Namtzen said after a time, quite casually. "What is it?"

Grey took a deep breath of the forest's cool green air and explained the matter as concisely as he could.

"Oh, how most distressing to your family! My dear fellow, I am so sorry." Von Namtzen's voice was full of sympathy. "What will happen to him, do you suppose?"

"I don't know. He will be tried, at a court-martial. And almost certainly will be found guilty. But the sentence ..." His voice died away. The memory of Otway being dragged, screaming, to the gallows was one that haunted Grey daily, but he felt superstitiously that to speak of the possibility was to invoke it. "I don't know," he said again.

"He will be found guilty," von Namtzen repeated, frowning. "There were witnesses, I understand, besides Captain Hauptmann?"

"There were. An officer named Custis—and myself."

Von Namtzen stopped dead, and dropped the sack containing the badger, in order to grip Grey by the arm.

"Grosser Gott!"

"Yes, I believe that sums up the matter very well."

"They will make you speak—testify—to it?"

"Unless I manage to be killed before he is court-martialed, yes."

Von Namtzen made a sound of deep consternation, shaking his head.

"What will you do?" he asked, after a bit.

"Live in the moment," Grey said, nodding at the bloodstained bag. "And hope that when my own moment comes, I, too, will walk out of the earth and see the sky again."

Von Namtzen didn't quite laugh, but snorted through his nose, and led the way through a stand of flowering trees that scattered tiny white petals down on them like snow.

"I was most pleased, of course, to hear that your brother's regiment would be attached to Duke Ferdinand's troops," he said, in an apparent attempt at casual conversation. "Not only for their valuable assistance, but because I hoped to have the chance of resuming our friendship."

"I, too," Grey said honestly. "I am only sorry that we cannot meet solely as friends, free of such unpleasant considerations as those I have brought you." Von Namtzen gave a lopsided shrug.

"We are soldiers," he said simply. "We will never be free of such things. And it is part of our friendship, is it not?"

Grey was not sure whether he meant their shared profession, or their shared involvement in recurrent unpleasantness, but it was true, in either case, and he laughed ruefully.

"Still," von Namtzen went on, knitting his heavy brows, "it is most unfortunate."

"Yes, it is."

"Not only the ... the occurrence." Von Namtzen made a brief gesture with his missing arm, which unbalanced him, so that he stumbled, but recovered with a muttered "Scheisse!"

"No," he resumed. "It is unfortunate that it involved both English and Prussian troops. Had it been our men, and only our own officers who witnessed the crime, it could have been dealt with ... more quietly."

Grey glanced at him. This feature of the situation had not escaped him. The English command could not be seen to deal lightly with such a matter, for fear of losing standing with their German allies. He hadn't thought consciously about the other side, but plainly the same must be true for the Germans.

"Yes. Would you have done—what you did—had there not been the prospect of a notorious trial and public execution?"

"Killed my lieutenant?" Von Namtzen would not accept any softening of reality. "I do not know. Had the men both been German, it is possible that they would simply have been discharged from the army, perhaps imprisoned for a time, perhaps banished. I think there would have been no trial."

"So it was my presence, in part, that led to this. You have my great regrets." God only knew how great.

Von Namtzen turned his head then, and gave him a smile of surprising sweetness.

"I would not for one moment regret your presence, John, no matter what the circumstance." He had never before used Grey's Christian name without his title, though Grey had often invited him to do so. He spoke it now with a touching shyness, as though not sure he was entitled to such familiarity.

Von Namtzen coughed, as though embarrassed by this declaration, and hastened to cover it.

"Of course, there is no saying what might be done on any occasion.

On the one hand, we—the army, that is to say—do not tolerate such perversions. The penalties are severe. On the other"—he glanced at his missing sleeve, and one side of his mouth lifted—"there is Friedrich."

"Fried—what, the king?"

"Yes. You know the story?" von Namtzen asked.

"Which one?" Grey said dryly. "Such a man is always the focus of tales—and I suppose some might even be true."

Von Namtzen laughed at that.

"This one is true," he assured Grey. "My own father was present at the execution."

"Execution?" Grey echoed, startled. "Whose?"

"Friedrich's lover." The Graf's momentary laughter had left him, but he smiled crookedly. "When he was a young man, his father—the old king, you know?—obliged him to join the army, though he disliked it intensely. A horror of bloodshed. But he formed a deep attachment to another young soldier, and the two decided to flee the country together."

"They were caught—of course," Grey said, a sudden hollow opening behind his breastbone.

"Of course." Stephan nodded. "They were brought back, both charged with desertion and treason, and the old king had Friedrich's lover beheaded in the courtyard—Friedrich himself forced to watch from a balcony above. He fainted, my father said, even before the sword fell."

Grey's own face felt suddenly cold, his jaw prickling with sweat. He swallowed hard, forcing down a sense of dizziness.

"There was some question," von Namtzen continued, matter-of-fact, "as to whether Friedrich might himself face the same fate, son or not. But in the end ..."

"He bowed to the inevitable, and became not only a soldier, but a great soldier."

Von Namtzen snorted.

"No, but he did—after spending a year in prison—agree to be married. He ignored his wife; he still does. And there are no children," he added disapprovingly. "But there she is." He shrugged.

"His father gave him the chateau at Rheinsberg, and he spent many years there, up to his ears in musicians and actors, but then"—he shrugged again—"the old king died."

And Friedrich, suddenly aware that his inheritance consisted of

several tasty chunks of disconnected and vulnerable land, most of them being eyed by the Habsburgs of Austria, had hastily become a soldier. Whereupon he had united his territories, stolen Silesia from the Austrians, and two years before, decided to invade Saxony for good measure, thus making enemies not only of the Austrians and Saxony, but of Russia, Sweden, *and* the French.

"And here we all are," von Namtzen concluded.

"Not a gentleman given to half measures."

"No, he is not. Nor is he a fool. Whatever the nature of his affections now, they remain private." Stephan spoke rather grimly, then shook his head, like a dog flinging off water. "Come, it grows soon dark."

It would be dark soon; already, the air between the trees had thickened, the forest drawing in upon itself. The path before them was still visible, but as they plunged back into the trees, the ground under their feet seemed insubstantial, rocks and tussocks nearly invisible, but unexpectedly solid.

The effort of walking without stumbling kept them from conversation, leaving Grey to reflect on the story of the King of Prussia and his lover—and the irony that the latter had been executed not for crimes of the flesh or seduction of his prince, but for treason. While Captain Bates ... He felt as though those sardonic eyes watched him from the forest, and hurried on, feeling darkness at his heels.

Nor was he the only one. He could sense von Namtzen's disquiet; see it, in the awkward shifting of his broad shoulders, tensed as though fearing some pursuit.

In a few moments, they reached the edge of the clearing in which the lodge stood, and emerged with a shared sense of relief into a soft haze of lavender, a pool of light still cupped between the forest's hands.

They paused for an instant, taking their bearings. Von Namtzen turned toward the lodge, but Grey stopped him with a hand upon his arm.

"Show me, Stephan," he said suddenly, surprising them both.

Von Namtzen's face went blank.

"Deinen Arm," Grey said, as though this were quite logical.

Stephan looked at him for a moment with no expression whatever, then away. Grey was already berating himself for clumsiness, but then Stephan's one hand reached for the pin that held the loose sleeve to the breast of his coat.

He shed the coat without difficulty, still not looking at Grey, but then paused, his hand on the white linen of his neckcloth.

"Hilf mir," he said softly.

Grey stepped close, and reached behind von Namtzen's head with both his own hands, fumbling a little with the fastening. Stephan's skin was very warm, the neckcloth damp. It came loose suddenly and he dropped it on the ground.

"I would not make a good valet," he said, trying to make a joke of it as he bent to pick the cloth up. From the corner of his eye, he saw Stephan's throat, long and powerful, a reddish mark across it from the cloth. Saw him swallow, and knew quite suddenly what to do.

He took Stephan's shirt off gently, with no further fumblings. He was ready for the sight of the arm, not shocked, though the thought of the solid forearm, the kind, broad hand now gone, made him sad. The stump was clean, cut just above the elbow; the scars well-knitted, though still an angry red.

Stephan's muscles tensed instantly when Grey touched him, and Grey whistled softly through his teeth, as though Stephan were a nervous horse, making the German snort a little, the sound not quite a laugh. Grey ran a soothing hand down the slope of von Namtzen's shoulder, his thumb tracing the groove between the muscles of the upper arm.

Von Namtzen had the most beautiful skin, he thought. No more than a sprinkling of dark gold hairs across his breast. Poreless and smooth, with a dusk that drew both eye and hand.

You are like porcelain, he thought, but didn't say it. And damned near as breakable, aren't you?

He lifted the unresisting arm, and lightly kissed the end of the stump.

"Schon gut," he said.

Saw Stephan's belly muscles spring out tight against the skin. The evening air was mild, but he could smell von Namtzen's sudden sweat, salt and musk, and his own body tightened, too, from scalp to knees. But this was not the time or place—nor the man. To allow Stephan to acknowledge his own desire now would destroy him—and to be the agent of such destruction would shatter Grey himself; he had no illusions regarding his own fragility.

There was one thing, perhaps, that he might give Stephan; it might not help—it hadn't helped Percy—but it was what he had.

"I love you, brother," he said, straightening and looking Stephan in

the eyes. "So you will stop trying to kill yourself, *ja*?"

He picked up the shirt and rolled it up in his hands, so that it went neatly over von Namtzen's head. Helped Stephan to slide his arms into the sleeves, and bent for the coat.

"I think ... you would be a very good valet." Von Namtzen blurted it, then blushed so deeply that it was visible, even in the fading light. "Entschuldigung! I—I do not mean to insult you."

"I think it a great compliment," Grey assured him gravely. "I am hungry—shall we go home to dinner now?"

Chapter 27



The Honorable Thing

Grey found himself steadier in mind upon his return from von Namtzen's lodge, and met all inquiries and expressions of sympathy with a remote, impeccable courtesy that kept the questioners—as well as his own feelings—at a safe remove. This technique, however, was ineffective with Hal.

It was several days after his return before he saw his brother, Hal having been with Duke Ferdinand. Hal came unannounced to his tent in the evening after supper, sitting down without invitation across the table from Grey, who was writing orders.

"Have you got any brandy?" Hal asked without preamble.

Grey reached beneath the table without comment and lifted the jug of very good brandy von Namtzen had sent with him—half empty now, but still plenty left.

Hal nodded thanks, lifted the jug in both hands and drank, then set it down, and shuddered slightly. He leaned his elbows on the table and put his face in his hands, rubbing slowly at the scalp beneath his wig. Finally, he looked up, his eyes bloodshot with travel and lined with a weariness that went far beyond mere bodily fatigue.

"Have you seen Wainwright since you came back?"

Grey shook his head, wordless. He knew where Percy was; a small country gaol in a nearby village. He had made the minimal inquiries necessary to assure that Percy was decently fed, and beyond that, had tried not to think of him. With a marked lack of success, but still, he tried.

"I suppose the news has spread," he said. His own voice was hoarse with disuse; he hadn't spoken to anyone in hours, and he cleared his throat. "Does the duke know?"

Hal grimaced, and took another drink. "Everyone *knows*, though the matter hasn't been brought up officially as yet."

"I suppose there will be a court-martial."

"The general feeling among the high command is that it would be much better if there wasn't."

He stared at Hal.

"What the devil do you mean by that?"

Hal rubbed a hand over his face.

"If he were a common soldier, it wouldn't matter," he said, voice muffled. Then he took his hand away, shaking his head. "Courtmartial him and hang or imprison him and be done with it. But he's not. He's a bloody member of the family. It can't be done discreetly."

Grey was beginning to have an unpleasant feeling under his breastbone.

"And what do they think *can* be done ... discreetly? Try him and discharge him for some other reason?"

"No." Hal's voice was colorless. "That might be done if no one really knew what had happened. But the circumstances ..." He gulped brandy, coughed, and kept coughing, going red in the face.

"'Unfortunate,' "he said hoarsely. "That's what Brunswick kept saying, in that precise sort of way he has. 'Most unfortunate.' "

Ferdinand was more precariously placed than King Friedrich. Friedrich was absolute master of his own army; Ferdinand commanded a number of loosely allied contingents, and was answerable to a number of princes for the troops they had supplied him.

"Some of these princes are strict Lutherans, and inclined to a rather ... rigid ... view of such matters. Ferdinand feels that he can't risk alienating them; not for *our* sake," he added, rather bitterly.

Grey stared down at the tabletop, rubbing the fingers of one hand lightly back and forth across the grain.

"What does he mean to do?" he asked. "Execute Wainwright outright, without trial?"

"He'd love to," Hal said, leaning back and sighing. "Save that that would cause still more stir and scandal. And, of course," he added, reaching for the brandy again, "I informed him that I'd be obliged to pull our own troops out and make an official complaint to the king—or kings; ours *and* Friedrich—should he try to treat a British soldier in that fashion."

The knot under Grey's heart seemed to ease a little. The departure of Hal's regiment wouldn't destroy Ferdinand's army, but it would be a blow—and the resultant uproar might well cause fragmentation among his other allies.

"What do they—or you—propose to do, then?" he asked. "Keep him locked up in hopes that he'll catch gaol fever and die, thus relieving you of awkwardness?" He'd spoken ironically, but Hal gave him an odd look, and coughed again.

Without speaking, he picked up the haversack he'd dropped by the table, and withdrew a pistol. It was an old one, of German manufacture.

"I want you to go and see him," he said.

"What?" Grey said, disbelieving.

"Do you know what happened to ... Wainwright's ..." Hal searched for a word. "... accomplice?"

"Yes, I do. Von Namtzen told me. Are you seriously suggesting that I call upon Percy Wainwright and murder him in the gaol?"

"No. I'm *suggesting* that you call upon him, give him this, and ... urge him to—to do the honorable thing. It would be best for everyone," Hal added softly, looking down at the tabletop. "Including him."

Grey stood up violently, almost overturning the table, and went out of the tent. He felt that he might fly into pieces if he didn't move.

He walked blindly through the camp, down the main alley of tents. He was vaguely conscious of men looking at him—a few waved or called to him, but he didn't answer, and they fell back, looking after him with puzzled faces.

Best for everyone.

Best for everyone. Including him.

"Including him," he whispered to himself. He reached the end of the alley, turned on his heel, and walked back. This time no one hailed him; only watched with fascination, as they might watch a gallows procession. He reached his own tent, pulled back the flap, and went in. Hal was still sitting at the table, the pistol and the jug of brandy in front of him.

He felt words like bits of gravel stuck in his throat, and chewed them fiercely, feeling them grit between his teeth.

You're the goddamed head of the family! You're his colonel, his commander. And you're his bloody brother, too—as much as I am.

He might have spit out any one of these things—or all of them. But he saw Hal's face. The bone-deep weariness in it, the strain of fighting —yet again—scandal and rumor. The everlasting, inescapable struggle to hold things together.

He said nothing. Only picked up the gun and went to put it in his own haversack.

You protect everyone, John, Percy's voice said, with sympathy. I don't suppose you can help it.

On his way back to the table, he opened the small campaign chest

that contained his utensils, and took the two pewter cups from their slots.

"Let us at least be civilized," he said calmly, and set them on the table.



Percy was sitting on the wooden bench that served him as seat, bed, and table. He looked up when the door opened, but didn't move. His eyes fixed upon Grey's face, wary.

The small whitewashed room was clean enough, but the smell of it struck Grey like a blow. There was no window, and the air was close and damp, rank with the smell of unwashed flesh and sour linen. It had plainly been a storeroom; chains of braided onions and black loops of blood sausage still hung from the rafters, their smell battling the bitter stink of an iron night-soil bucket that stood in the corner, unlidded, unemptied. A protest at this small indignity rose to his lips, but he pressed them tight together and swallowed it, nodding to the guard. Given his errand, what did such things matter?

There were narrow slits beneath the eaves of the room, but the room itself lay in a shadow fractured by the moving leaves of the tree that overhung the building. Grey moved through the dim, shattered light, feeling that he moved underwater, every thought and motion slowed.

The door closed behind him. Footsteps went away and they were alone, in no danger of being overheard. There were noises in the distance: the shuffling of boots and the shout of distant orders in the square, the sounds of boisterous companionship from the tavern next door.

"Are you treated decently?" The words were dry, emotionless. He knew only too well what the attitude of guards toward a prisoner accused of sodomy was likely to be.

Percy glanced away, mouth twisting a little.

"I—yes."

Grey set down the stool the guard had given him, and sat upon it. He'd envisioned this moment hundreds of times since Hal had given him the gun; sleepless, sweating, ill—to no avail. He could not find a single word with which to begin.

"I'm glad to see you, John," Percy said, quietly.

"Don't be."

Percy's eyes widened a little, but he made a game attempt to smile. They'd let him shave, Grey saw; his cheeks were smooth.

"I should always be glad to see you, no matter your errand. And from the look of you, I doubt it is pleasant." He hesitated. "Have you —will they try me here, do you know? Or send me back to England?"

"That—I don't know. I've—"

He gave up any thought of speaking. Instead, he took the gun from his pocket, handling it gingerly, as though it were a venomous serpent, and laid it on the bench. It was loaded and primed, requiring only to be cocked.

Percy sat for a moment staring at it, expressionless.

"They made you bring it?" he asked. "The duke? Melton?"

Grey gave one brief nod, his throat too tight to speak. Percy's eyes searched his face, quick and dark.

"At least it wasn't your own notion," he said. "That's ... a comfort."

Then Percy rose abruptly and turned, putting out both hands as though to grasp the sill of a window that wasn't there. Hands flat against the whitewashed brick, he lowered his head so that his forehead rested against the wall, his face invisible.

"I must say something to you," he said, and his voice came low but clear, controlled. "I have been waiting in hope of your coming, so that I might say it. You will think I tell you by way of excuse for actions for which there can be no excuse, but I can't help that. Only listen to me, I beg you."

He stood waiting. Grey sat staring at the pistol, loaded and primed. He'd loaded it himself.

"Go on, then," Grey said at last.

He saw Percy's back swell with his breath, and saw the naked lines of it beneath broadcloth and linen, slender, perfect.

"The first time I lay with a man, it was for money," Percy said quietly. "I was fourteen. We had had no food for two days—my mother and I. I was going through the alleyways, looking for anything that might be sold. A man found me there—Henry, he was called, I never knew his last name—a well-dressed man, rather stout. He told me he was a law clerk, and he may have been. He took me to his room, and when he had finished, he gave me three shillings. A fortune." He spoke without irony.

"And so you ... continued. With him?" Grey strove to keep his own voice colorless.

Percy's head rose from the bricks, and he turned round, dark eyes somber.

"Yes," he said simply. "Him, others. It made the difference between poverty and outright hunger. And I discovered that my own tastes ... lay that way." He gave Grey a direct look. "It was not always for money."

Grey felt something turn over inside him, and didn't know whether it was regret or relief.

"I ... when I thought ... that there might be something between us ... I would not come to you at once; you noticed, I think?"

Oh, yes.

"There was a man—I will not give his name; it is not important—call him 'Mr. A,' perhaps. He was ..."

"Your protector?" Grey gave the word an ugly intonation, and was pleased to see Percy's jaw clench.

"If you like," Percy said tersely, and met his eyes directly. "I would not come to you until I had broken with him. I did not wish there to be any ... complication."

"Indeed."

"Michael—the man with whom you saw me ..." He pronounced the name in the German way, Grey noticed: "Meechayel." "I knew him. Before. We met in London, a year ago."

"Money?" Grey asked brutally. "Or ...?"

Percy took a deep breath and looked away.

"Or," he said. He bit his lower lip. "I told him I did not ... that there was someone—I did not tell him your name," he added quickly, looking up.

"Thank you for that," Grey said. His lips felt stiff.

Percy swallowed, but did not look away again.

"He insisted. Once, he said, what harm? I would not. And then he said—it was not quite a threat, but clear enough—he said, what if there began to be talk? Among the German officers, among our—our own. About me."

Clear enough, Grey thought bleakly. Was it the truth? Did it matter? "I do not tell you by way of excuse," Percy repeated, and stared at Grey, unblinking.

"Why, then?"

"Because I loved you," Percy said, very softly. "Since we began, I have not touched anyone else, or thought of it. I wished you to know that."

And considering his history—as he told it—that was a considerable affirmation of affection, Grey thought cynically.

"You cannot say the same, can you?" Percy was still looking at him, his mouth tight.

He opened his own mouth to refute this, but then realized what Percy meant. He had not touched another, no; but there *was* another. And exactly where was the boundary to be found, between the flesh and the heart? He shut his mouth.

"Do not tell me I have broken your heart. I know better." Percy's face was pale, but hectic patches of red had begun to glow across his cheekbones—as though Grey had slapped him. He turned suddenly away, and began to strike the white wall with his fist, slowly, soundlessly.

"I know better," he repeated, his voice low and bitter.

If it is your intent to place the fault for this disaster upon my shoulders—He swallowed the words, unspoken. He would neither defend himself nor engage in pointless recriminations.

"Perseverance," Grey said, very softly. Percy halted abruptly. After a moment, he rubbed a hand over his face, once, twice, then swung round to face Grey.

"What?"

"What do you want of me?"

Percy looked at him for some moments, unspeaking. At last he shook his head, one side of his mouth turned up in what was not quite a smile.

"What I wanted, you couldn't give me, could you? Couldn't even lie about it, honorable bloody honest bastard that you are. Can you lie now? Can you tell me that you loved me?"

I could tell you, he thought. *And it would be true. But not true enough.* He did not know whether Percy spoke out of panic and anger—or whether from a calculated effort to evoke Grey's guilt, and thus his help. It didn't really matter.

The air in the small room hung thick, silent.

Percy made a small, contemptuous sound. Grey kept his eyes fixed on his hands.

"Is that what you want?" he asked at last, very quietly.

Percy rocked back a little, eyes narrowed.

"No," he said slowly. "No, I don't. It's late to talk of love, isn't it?" "Very late."

He could feel Percy's eyes upon him, gauging him. He lifted his

head, and saw the look of a man about to roll dice for high stakes. It came to him, with a small, sudden shock, that he recognized that look because he was a gambler himself. He hadn't realized that before, but there was no time to contemplate the revelation.

"What I want," Percy said, each word distinct, "is my life." He saw the uncertainty cross Grey's face with the possibilities that conjured—if it could be done; a sentence of imprisonment, transportation—and the considerations of what those possibilities might mean—not only to Percy, but to Hal, the regiment, the family ...

"And my freedom."

A feeling of sudden, senseless rage came over him, so strong that he pressed his fists into his thighs to keep from springing to his feet and striking Percy.

"For God's sake," he said, voice harsh with the effort to keep it low. "You do this—make such a frigging *mess*—why did you not tell me? I could have made sure *Meechayel* was no threat to you. For that matter, how can you have been so weak, so stupid, as to give in to a feeble threat like that? Unless you wished it, and took the excuse—no, don't say anything. Not a fucking word!" He struck his fist violently upon his knee.

"You do this," he went on, voice trembling, "you not only destroy yourself, you embroil us all—"

"All. You and your bloody brother and your goddamned family *honor,* you mean—"

"Yes, our goddamned family honor! *And* the honor of the regiment—of which you are a sworn officer, I remind you. How dare you utter the word 'honor'? Yet you *do* dare—and presume further to demand that I not only perform some miracle to save your life, but to save you from all consequences of your folly?"

The pistol lay on the bench before him, loaded and primed, requiring only to be cocked. For one instant, he thought how simple it would be to pick it up, cock it, and shoot Percy between the eyes. No questions would be asked.

"I didn't say that."

Percy's voice was choked. Grey couldn't look at Percy's face, but saw the long hands clench, unfold, reclench themselves. There was silence between them, the kind of silence that rings with unspoken words.

There were noises, somewhere in the building. Voices, laughter. How was it possible that normal life continued, anywhere? He heard

Percy draw breath, heard it catch in his throat.

"You could not give me love, you said—but kindness and honor; those were yours to give," Percy whispered. Grey looked up, and saw that the hectic flush had faded, the luminous skin gone pallid and chalky.

"There is no honor left to me." His lips trembled; he pressed them tight for an instant. "If—if there is any kindness left between us, John—I beg you. Save me."



He couldn't. Could not bear to remember: not Percy warm in his bed, not Percy in the fetid cell—certainly not Percy in the attic room with Weber—could not think about the current situation, could not decide what to do, or even how to feel. Consequently, he went through the necessary motions of each day like an automaton, moving, speaking, even smiling as necessary, but aware all the time of the clockwork within, and his inability to stir beyond the constraints imposed upon him.

Beyond a terse inquiry as to whether Percy was housed and treated decently, Hal had not inquired as to the results of his visit—a glance at Grey upon his return had told of the failure of his mission. The old pistol was still in Grey's haversack.

The note arrived a week later. There was no direction upon it—a German private had delivered it—but Grey knew where it had come from.

He should throw it into the fire. Grimacing, he slid a thumb beneath the flap and broke the seal. There was no salutation; was that caution on Percy's part, he wondered, to avoid incriminating Grey if the letter should be intercepted—or simply that Percy no longer knew how to address him? The question evaporated from his mind as he read the opening.

I will leave you to imagine, if you will, what the writing of this letter costs me, for that ultimate cost is up to you. I have been in perturbation of mind for days, debating whether I shall write it, and now, having written, whether to send it. The end of my deliberations, though, is the point from which I began: that to speak may mean my life; not to speak may mean yours. If you are reading these words,

you will know which I have chosen.

Grey rubbed a hand over his face, shook his head violently to clear it, and read the rest.

You know something of my history, including my relations with the gentleman I will call A. One day whilst I was in his house, another gentleman called upon him. I was sent upstairs, their business being private. Looking out upon the drive, I saw the visitor's coach, which was a very elegant equipage, plainly not hired, but minus armorial markings or crests. After a short time, the gentleman came out and was driven away. I saw nothing of him save a glimpse of his hat as he passed out from beneath the porte cochère, though I did hear him exchange some words in farewell with Mr. A.

Being sent for, I came down, whereupon A told me that his visitor had heard of your mother's marriage, and thus of my putative relations with your family, and wished to know whether I had met you or your brother, and when we might meet again. A had told his visitor of my luncheon with you and Melton, adding that I had invited you to Lady Jonas's salon. The visitor had given A a packet of money to give to me, and asked that in return, I should undertake to guide you to the edge of Hyde Park upon our departing the salon, and should leave you near the Grosvenor Gate, as he wished to have a message delivered to you there.

This sounding innocent enough, I did as he requested. As you did not mention the matter upon our next meeting, I supposed it either confidential or inconsequent, and thus did not ask you about it. I did not learn of your encounter with the two soldiers in the park until you told me of it later. I was shocked to hear of it, but did not perceive that the incident might be connected with Mr. A's visitor.

Then we were attacked in Seven Dials, and I realized that you were the specific target of it. This caused me to recall Mr. A's visitor and his errand, and consider whether both attacks might have been at his instigation. I could see no reason for such a thing, however, and thus held my peace, though resolving to keep close guard upon you.

You then told me the true story of your father's death, and later of the other odd events, such as the page of your father's journal discovered in your brother's office. I began to suspect at this point that the matters were connected, but I still could not see how. As the regiment was bound to depart within such a short time, though, it seemed you would be removed from harm.

I had, as I say, debated for some time whether to write to you regarding my knowledge. The matter became exigent early this week. I heard a voice in the corridor outside my cell, and believe that I recognized it as the voice of Mr. A's visitor. I could not attract the attention of a guard for some time. When finally I succeeded in speaking to one, I asked who the English stranger had been. The guard did not know, had not seen the man—but was persuaded for a consideration to make inquiries, and next day returned to tell me that the man was an army surgeon, come to make trial of a new experiment upon one of the prisoners who had suffered a grisly leg wound.

I cannot swear it is the same man, and if it is, I still do not know why he should wish you harm, though I must suppose that it has to do with your father's death. If it is connected in this manner, though, then there is every reason to suppose that you and your brother lie in mortal danger.

Believe me always your servant, P. Wainwright (2nd Lieutenant)

Grey said something blasphemous under his breath, and threw the letter on the table.

Mysterious visitors and army surgeons—with no names. It was possible that Percy had not been able to discover the surgeon's name —if Mr. A's visitor had been the same man, or if he even existed. It was also possible that the man did exist and Percy knew his name, but wished to force Grey to see him again in order to discover it. He made no mention in his letter of trading further information for the Greys' assistance, but the implication was clear enough.

"Are you all right, me lord?" Tom Byrd was squinting at him dubiously. "You look what my mam calls bilious. Ought you to be bled, maybe?"

Grey felt distinctly bilious, but doubted that bleeding would help. On the other hand ...

"Yes," he said abruptly. "Go and ask Dr. Protheroe if he might come as soon as convenient."

Tom, unaccustomed to having Grey accept his medical suggestions, looked stunned for a moment, but then lighted up.

"Right away, me lord!" He hastily stuffed the shirt he had been mending back in the chest, and shrugged into his coat, but paused at the door to offer further advice.

"If you feel as though the blood might burst from your nose before the doctor comes, the thing to do is put a key at the back of your neck, me lord."

"A key? What for?"

Tom shrugged.

"I don't know, but it's what my mam would do for a nosebleed."

"I'll bear that in mind," Grey said. "Go!"

He stood in the middle of the tent after Tom's departure, wanting to do something violent, but was forestalled by the lack of anything breakable within reach save his shaving mirror, which he was loath to part with.

He wasn't sure how much of his anger was due to this further evidence of Percy's perfidy in keeping the information from him, and how much to the discoveries that Percy had made. There was no doubt that the blood was pounding through his head, though. He went so far as to feel his nose surreptitiously, but perceived no evidence that it was about to spurt blood.

"What are you doing?" Hal stood in the tent, flap in one hand, eyeing him in puzzlement.

"Nothing. Read that." He thrust the letter at his brother.

Hal read it twice; Grey was grimly interested to see Hal's color rise and a vein begin to throb in his forehead.

"That little shit!" Hal flung the pages down. "Does he know the surgeon's name?"

"I don't know. Possibly not. You can go and ask him if you like; I won't."

Hal grunted, and glanced at the pages again.

"Do you think there's anything to it?"

"Oh, yes," Grey said grimly. "He might withhold the name, but I see no reason for him to invent the story. What would be the profit to himself in that?"

Hal frowned, thinking.

"Only to cause us to come to him, I suppose—that he might appeal for our help directly, in hopes that a personal appeal would be more efficacious than a letter."

"There's no help we can offer—is there?" Grey was not sure that he wished to know, if there was—but could not deny the small flicker of

hope that rose in him with the question.

"Not much." Hal rubbed a knuckle under his lip. "If he is condemned, I think it might be possible to exert some influence in order to get his sentence commuted to imprisonment or transportation. *Might*, I say. I would try," he added, with a brief glance at Grey. "For his stepfather's sake."

"If he is condemned," Grey echoed. "Do you honestly think there is any chance that he will not be?"

"Not the chance of a snowflake in hell," Hal said bluntly. "We must be prepared for—who's this?"

It was Tom, returning with Dr. Protheroe, the regimental surgeon, who put down his bag and glanced from Melton to Grey and back again.

"Ahh ... your man here says you are bilious?" The question was put dubiously. Protheroe was small-boned, dark, and handsome; a skillful surgeon, but quite young, and rather in awe of Hal.

"Well, not precisely," Grey began, with a glance at the letter on the desk, but Hal cut him swiftly off.

"Yes, my brother is feeling a trifle indisposed. Perhaps you would not mind examining him?" He gave Grey a minatory stare, forbidding him to contradict, and before he could think of some suitable excuse, Grey found himself seated on a stool, being obliged to put out his tongue, have the whites of his eyes peered at, his liver prodded, and answer various humiliating questions regarding the more intimate processes of his body.

Meanwhile, Hal engaged Protheroe in apparently careless conversation regarding his experience in Prussia, what he thought of the food, how the men did ... Grey glared at his brother over Protheroe's head, which was pressed to his chest, mouthing, "Get *on* with it!" at him.

"Do you have much to do with your fellows?" Hal inquired at last, pleasantly. "The other regimental surgeons?"

"Oh, yes." Protheroe was fishing in his bag. Grey grimaced; he was about to be bled, he knew it. "One or two of the German fellows are quite knowledgeable—and the duke has an Italian surgeon, who has the most marvelous instruments. He showed me them once—never seen anything like them!"

"Quite," Hal said. He glanced again at the letter. "How many English surgeons are there, do you know?"

Protheroe continued to rustle through his bag.

"Oh, five or six," he said vaguely. "Now, Lord John, I think—"

"Do you know their names?" Grey asked rudely. Protheroe blinked and Hal rolled his eyes in exasperation.

"Why, yes ... of course. Simmonds—he's with the Fourteenth. I do believe, my lord, that leeches will be the best thing. Your man says you've been troubled by headache of late—"

"That's certainly true," Grey said, eyeing the lidded jar the doctor had removed from his bag. "But I really—"

"Simmonds," Hal interrupted. "Who else?"

"Oh." Protheroe scratched reflectively at his jaw. "Entwidge—good man, Entwidge," he added magnanimously. "Though a trifle young." Protheroe could not be twenty-four himself, Grey thought.

"And there's Danner ..." A twist of the lips dismissed Danner as a charlatan. "Have you any milk to hand, my lord?"

"Just here, sir!" Tom, who had been hovering in obvious anticipation of this request, sprang forward, milk jug in hand. "You'd best take your shirt off, me lord," he said importantly to Grey. "You won't want to go about smelling of sour milk, should any of it drip."

"Indeed I won't," Grey said, with a foul look at his brother, who appeared to be finding something funny in the situation. Resigned, he stripped off his shirt and allowed the medico to anoint the skin of his neck and temples generously with milk.

"The milk encourages them to bite with so much more enthusiasm," Protheroe explained, dabbing busily.

"I know," Grey said through his teeth. He closed his eyes involuntarily as Protheroe scooped a dark blob out of his jar. The bite of a horseleech did not really hurt, he knew that. The creatures carried some element in their saliva that numbed the sensation. But the clammy, heavy feel of the thing against his skin revolted him, and the knowledge that the leech was slowly and pleasurably filling itself with his blood made him light-headed with disgust.

He *knew* it was harmless, even beneficial. His stomach, however, was ignorant of any sense of scientific detachment, and curled up in agitation.

Protheroe and Tom were arguing as to how many of the vile creatures might be the optimum, the doctor thinking a half dozen sufficient, but urged on by Tom, who was of the opinion that if half a spoon of something was good, three were better, when it came to medicine.

"That's quite enough, sir, I thank you." Grey straightened himself

on the stool, chin lifted to avoid any more contact than necessary with the leeches now festooned round his neck like a ruff, sucking away. A film of sweat came out on his brow, to be wiped away by the doctor, seeking a good roosting spot on his temple for another of the obnoxious things.

"That will do capitally," Protheroe exclaimed in satisfaction, drawing back to study Grey as though he were some work of art. "Excellent. Now, my lord, if you will just remain still while the leeches do their work, all will be well. I am sure you will obtain relief almost at once."

Grey's only relief was the observation that Hal had gone green around the gills, and was clearly trying not to look in Grey's direction. That was some slight comfort, Grey thought. At least he himself couldn't *see* the bloody things.

"I'll go out with you, sir," Hal said hurriedly, seeing Protheroe close up his bag and make ready to depart. Grey shot him an evil look, but Hal gestured briefly at the letter and went out in the doctor's wake.

Tom tenderly draped a towel about his shoulders: "Lest as you might take a chill, me lord." It was midday and sweltering, but Grey was too busy trying to ignore the morbid fancy that he was being quite drained of blood to register a protest.

"Fetch me some brandy, will you, Tom?"

Tom looked dubious.

"I think you oughtn't to drink brandy whilst being leeched, me lord. Might be as the little fellows would get squiffy and fall off afore they've quite done."

"What an excellent idea. Get me brandy, Tom, and get a lot of it. Now."

Tom's disposition to argue was interrupted by the reappearance of Hal, who looked at Grey, shuddered, and pulled the snuffbox containing his smelling salts from his pocket. Grey was touched at this evidence of solicitude for his distress, but uttered a cry of indignation at seeing Hal put the vial to his own nose.

"Give me that! I need it more than you do."

"No, you don't." Hal drew in a deep breath, choked, and went into a coughing fit. "Protheroe remembered another surgeon's name," he wheezed, eyes watering.

"What? Who?"

"Longstreet," Hal said, coughed again, and handed over the salts. "Arthur Longstreet. He's here with the Prussians."

Grey pulled the cork and lifted the vial to his nose. "Brandy, Tom," he said briefly. "Bring the damned bottle."



Beyond the interesting scientific discovery that brandy did indeed appear to intoxicate leeches, the effect of Mr. Protheroe's visit was indecisive.

"With the Prussians," Grey repeated, pulling on his shirt with a sense of profound relief. "Where with the Prussians?"

"Protheroe didn't know," Hal replied, bending over the table to peer at a leech, which was extending itself in an eccentric and voluptuous manner. "He just happened to meet Longstreet a week ago, and saw that he was wearing a Prussian uniform. But he naturally didn't take any notice of which regiment. Do you think that one's dead?"

Grey prodded the insensible animal in question, then gingerly picked it up betwixt his thumb and forefinger.

"I think it's just passed out." He dropped it into the jar and wiped his fingers fastidiously on his breeches. "It shouldn't be impossible to find him."

"No," Hal said thoughtfully. "But we must be careful. If he does mean you—or me—harm, it wouldn't do to alert him to the fact that we know about him."

"I should think that would be the best way of insuring that he doesn't attempt to do us harm."

"Forewarned is forearmed, and I have every faith in your ability to defend yourself from a mere surgeon," Hal said, with a rare smile. "No, we don't want to alert him beforehand, because we want to talk to him. Privately."

Chapter 28



Hückelsmay

He had reproached Percy for reckless stupidity. At the same time, he was painfully aware that he had often been as reckless and stupid himself. He had been luckier, that was all. Once, no more than a few seconds had saved him from precisely the sort of disaster that had now befallen Percy. The memory of that instance was enough to bring him out in a cold sweat—all the colder for his exact knowledge now of what could so easily have happened.

The immediate shock and the hurt of betrayal had faded, leaving in their wake a sort of dull wretchedness. He kept this wrapped round himself like a sheet of canvas against a storm, knowing that to let it go was to suffer instead piercing gusts of sorrow and terror.

The army had moved on, leaving Percy in his cell with the sausages. Tonight, they camped near the village of Crefeld—"crowfield," it meant in English, a very literal place-name; the fields teemed with the black birds by day, and flocks of crows burst cawing from the furrowed fields as the army passed.

But the army had settled now, and night rose gently from the fields near Crefeld. The air was still, and the smoke of watch fires mingled with the natural haze that always hung above the fields; a dark mist seemed to rise slowly about his horse's hooves as he rode.

Grey passed from company to company as the summer night came slowly on, dismounting at each fire long enough to share a swallow of beer, a bite of bread or sausage as he talked with the captains, the lieutenants, the corporals. Passed through each camp, nodding, smiling, exchanging words with men he recognized, assessing mood, readiness, equipment with seeming casualness. Hearing with one ear the concerns and talk of his officers, the other listening to the sounds of the encroaching night. Waiting for any interruption in the cricket song of the gathering dark between camps, any note of alarm in the muffled talk and laughter of the troops settling to supper and their rest. Somewhere nearby was the enemy.

"A day's march still, I heard, before we catch the Frenchies up," offered Tarleton, one of the two ensigns who always trailed him in the field, ready to relay messages, carry dispatches, execute orders, find

food, and be generally available dogsbodies.

"Where'd you hear that?" Brett, the younger, asked with interest. "From the Hessians, I mean, or one of ours?" He sounded excited; this was his first campaign, and he thirsted for battle.

"Uh ... quartermaster's lieutenant," Tarleton confessed. "He'd got it from one of the Germans, but didn't say who. Do you think he's right, though, sir?" he called to Grey. "Are we getting close?"

Tarleton was perhaps eighteen, to Brett's fifteen, and affected great sophistication. His voice had broken late, though, and still had a tendency to crack in moments of stress. The word "close" soared perilously upward, but Brett was wise enough not to laugh, and the fading light hid Grey's own smile.

"Yes, they'll be close," he answered patiently. "They have artillery; they'll find it slow going." So, of course, did Ferdinand of Brunswick's Prussians and Hanoverians and their English allies; they'd been chasing the Comte de Clermont's army for the best part of a month, down the Rhine Valley.

This was rich farmland and the soil was fertile and damp—so damp, in fact, that when latrines were dug, the seep filled them halfway with water within a day. The English artillery crews were perched, grumbling, on the driest patch of land available, off to the west. Karolus lifted his head as they passed, neighing to the horses in the artillery park. Grey felt a sudden surge of interest pass through the stallion, his mane lifting and nostrils flaring as the damp, drifting air evidently brought him the scent of a mare.

"Not now, you randy sod," Grey said, nudging him firmly with a bootheel and reining him round. Karolus made a disgruntled noise, but obeyed.

"Pining, is he, sir?" Tarleton asked, joking.

"Eh, balls full to bursting will get anyone in trouble, won't they?" said Brett, endeavoring to sound worldly.

Grey raised a brow and thought he had better have a word with each ensign, privately, regarding the unwisdom of dealings with whores—not that such warnings would be heeded in the slightest. The battalion had been encamped in its present position since midmorning; more than enough time for the ragtag collection of camp followers to catch them up. He stood briefly in his stirrups, looking toward the river, where the line of sturdy farmhouses stood, all their windows lighted like beacons.

There was no smudge of smoke on the horizon yet, though, to mark

the arrival of the heavy wagons and the mule drovers, the untidy straggle of laundresses, cooks, foragers, children, and wives—official and less so—and the women whose ill fortune condemned them to eke out a living following an army. But they'd be there soon enough; it was an hour at least before full dark, and he'd wager his best boots that the camp followers would be solidly entrenched before moonrise.

The ground in this part of the Rhine Valley was flat as a flounder, though the hedgerows and woods between the fields grew high enough to obscure the view. From where he sat at present, he could just make out the spires of one, two ... yes, three village churches, poking black into a sky the color of molten pewter.

The ensigns had continued their raillery, daring each other into still more lewdly suggestive remarks. Half listening, Grey caught a phrase and jerked his head toward the ensigns. It was a movement of surprised reflex, more than an actual realization that they had been making a clumsily veiled reference to Percy Wainwright, but the effect was immediate.

There was a brief hiss from Tarleton, and Brett shut up sharp. He was sure they had meant no deliberate offense; neither of them knew Percy well, and likely had not recalled the family relationship between the disgraced lieutenant and Grey—until it was too late.

There was a constricted silence behind Grey. He ignored it for a moment, then reined up.

"Mr. Brett?" he called over one shoulder.

"Sir!"

"Go back to Captain Wilmot; I'd forgot to tell him to join Lord Melton and the duke at field headquarters after supper. The same message to each of the other captains. Then you are relieved." It was unnecessary to tell the captains, since they would naturally come anyway—and riding back through the camps would occupy Brett for the next couple of hours and cause him to miss his own supper. It gave the young ensign an opportunity of escape, though, and he seized it gratefully, reining abruptly round with an "Aye, sir!" and making off at the gallop.

"Mr. Tarleton."

"Sir?"

Tarleton's voice cracked; Grey ignored it.

"Do you see that church spire?" He chose one at random, pointing. "Go up it. Survey the countryside."

"Aye, s—but, sir! It will be black dark before I reach it!"

"So it will," Grey said pleasantly. "I suppose you'll have to wait for the dawn, then, before you report back."

"Ah ... yes, sir," Tarleton said, crestfallen. "Certainly, sir."

"Excellent. And don't fall into the Landwehr, please."

"No, sir. The ... er ...?"

"The land dyke. Large double ditch, walled canal filled with water? We crossed it, earlier."

"Oh, that. No, sir, I won't."

Grey remained where he was, until Tarleton had disappeared in the direction of the distant church, then swung off Karolus. He welcomed the chance to be alone, if only for a bit.

Holding the reins in one hand, he bent his head on impulse, pressing his forehead against the horse's neck and closing his eyes, taking a little comfort in the stallion's solid warmth. Karolus turned his massive head and blew a generous blast of moist breath down Grey's neck, as an indication that he forgave Grey's earlier thwarting of his desires.

Grey jerked, and laughed a little.

"All right, then." With an eye to the nearness of the invisible mare, he hobbled Karolus and left him to crop grass, while he himself sought the relief of a quiet piss.

There were no trees in this country, save the orchards near the farmhouses. He nearly chose a pile of stones that loomed in the twilight, realizing just in time that it was in fact one of the small shrines that littered the countryside like anthills, and switched his aim to a convenient bush.

Finished, he did up his flies and put a hand to his pocket, almost involuntarily. It was still there; he felt the crackle of paper.

The note had arrived during the afternoon; he had nearly ignored it, but recognizing Symington's sprawling fist on the direction, had opened it. Symington-like, it was brief, blunt, and to the point.

Custis is dead, it said, without salutation, adding as an afterthought, Flux. It was discreetly unsigned.

He supposed he should feel sorry—perhaps he would, later, when he might have both time and emotion to spare. As it was, he felt Custis's death to be nearly as significant to himself as it undoubtedly was to Custis.

Everyone *knew* what had happened at the *Gasthof*. The fact remained that only Grey, Custis, and Hauptmann had seen it. Michael Weber was dead, Captain Hauptmann gone to Bavaria. Now Custis

was gone, too. Which left Grey as the sole eyewitness to the crime.

Hal, with his usual obsessive ruthlessness, had laid hands on every record he could find of courts-martial for the crime of sodomy—surprisingly few, considering just how widespread Grey happened to know that particular crime was in military circles. The conclusion there was obvious, and something Grey had also known for years; the military hierarchy had no appetite for that sort of scandal—save, of course, when it might cover something worse. But when a blind eye might be turned, it almost certainly would be.

By the same token, a military court was not eager to convict an officer of sodomy—save the officer was a nuisance for other reasons, as Otway and Bates had been. Thus, while a court-martial was not bound by the rules of evidence that constrained the barristers and judges, there was still a strong reluctance to accept anything short of an eyewitness's account.

And Grey was now the only eyewitness.

The evening was not cold in the slightest, but he shivered abruptly.

Could he stand before the court-martial, swear to tell the truth—and lie? With everyone—including the judges—completely aware that it was a lie?

It would be the ruin of his own career and reputation. Some might see such an act as misguided loyalty to family; many more would see it as an indication that Grey sympathized with Percy's inclinations—or shared them. Either way, rumors would follow him. Discharge from the army was inevitable, and with the odor of such scandal clinging to him, he could not hope to find any reception in English society—or even in the service of a foreign army.

And yet ... it was Percy's life. *If there is any kindness left between us ... I beg you. Save me.* Could he tell the truth and see Percy go to the gallows—or to prison or indentured servitude—and then simply return to his own life?

For an instant, he fantasized the possibility of securing Percy's freedom, whether by lies or bribery, then going abroad, the two of them together. He had money enough.

To live a pointless existence of idleness with a man whom he could not trust. No, it would not serve.

"Damn you, Perseverance," he said softly. "I wish I had never set eyes upon you." He sighed, rubbing the palms of his hands over his closed eyelids.

And yet he did not mean that, he realized. He did feel that way

about Jamie Fraser—but not Percy. And became aware, very much too late, that he did love Percy Wainwright. But ... enough to try to save him, at the cost of his own honor, his own life, even though there could be nothing left between them?

And then there was Hal. He touched his pocket again, distracted. If Symington knew about Custis, so did Hal. His brother would be grimly calculating what this might mean—and doubtless arriving at the same conclusions. The notion that Grey would lie at the courtmartial, though—he doubted that Hal would imagine that possibility.

He did not know how much Hal might know or suspect of his own inclinations; the matter had never been spoken of between them, and never would be. But if he were to declare his intent to perjure himself before the court-martial in order to save Percy's life—Hal would likely do anything to stop him, including shooting him. Not fatally, he supposed, with a wry smile at the thought; only sufficiently as to justify shutting him up somewhere under a doctor's care.

Still, that would not solve the problem; Percy would merely languish in prison until such time as Grey was recovered enough to testify. No, he decided, Hal's response would more likely be to knock Grey over the head, bundle him into a sack, and have him smuggled aboard a merchantman bound for China, after which he would declare Grey lost at sea, and ...

He discovered that he was laughing helplessly at the thought, tears coming to his eyes.

"Christ, Hal, I wish you *would*," he said aloud, and quite suddenly thought of Aberdeen, realizing for the first time just how desperately his brother loved him.

"Christ, Hal," he whispered.

Rubbing a sleeve over his face, he drew a deep breath of the heavy air, and smelled flowers. Peering downward, he saw a heap of wilted flowers, white and yellow, fallen to the ground. His elbow had dislodged them as he brushed against the little shrine; he gathered them gently into a bunch and laid them neatly back on the ledge at the front of it.

It was too dark to see the carving on the plaque within the shrine, but his exploring fingers made out a roman numeral—II, he thought it was. It must be one of the Stations of the Cross von Namtzen had told him of. People walked from one such shrine to the next as a sort of devotional pilgrimage, meditating on the events in Christ's life leading to His crucifixion.

There was, of course, a threat in Percy's power, and one Grey was only too aware of, though Percy had sufficient delicacy not to have mentioned it. Facing the gallows, Percy might decide to reveal his relationship with Grey. Grey did not think such an allegation could be proved; no one had ever seen them in a compromising situation—but under the circumstances, the accusation would be damaging enough.

This, of course, was not something he could discuss with Hal.

He was not religious, but was sufficiently familiar with Scripture as to have heard the story of Gethsemane. *Let this cup pass away*.

He looked across the fields toward Hückelsmay, and saw the watch fires burning—the stations on his own road to Calvary, he thought grimly. He'd like to know what Christ would have done in his position, that's all.



He was quartered with several other British officers in one of the large farmhouses near the canal, a place called Hückelsmay. Despite the aura of suppressed tension, the atmosphere in the house was welcoming, the air filled with the scent of fried potatoes and roast pork, warm with smoke and conviviality.

Grey forced himself to eat a little, mostly for Tom's sake, and then went to sit in a corner, where he could avoid having to talk to people.

He was near a window, tightly closed and shuttered for the night, but he felt the draft from it nonetheless, and heard the occasional grunt of sleeping pigs, perhaps disturbed by the rich smell of their erstwhile brother roasting. All the houses near the *Landwehr* were encircled by small ditches or moats. As well as providing defense for the houses, these moats provided easy access to water, and provided an excellent wallow for the pigs, who lay blissfully sunk in the mud of the ditch, handy when wanted.

He should go up and sleep, he supposed—but he had the feeling that sleep would not come easily tonight. Better to be where there were other people than thrashing to and fro in darkness, alone with his thoughts.

He became gradually aware of eyes upon him, and looking up, found himself the cynosure of a small girl who stood in front of him. She wore a neat apron, a cap, and an unexpected pair of spectacles, which magnified her eyes remarkably, thus intensifying her gaze. She

wore a small frown, as though not quite sure what he was.

"Bitte?" he said, employing that useful German word which effortlessly encompasses "please," "thank you," "I beg your pardon," and "what do you want?" in a single term of politeness.

The little girl at once executed a bob, and peered at him with increased intentness.

"Herr Thomas says I may speak to you, mein Herr," she announced.

"Does he? Well, then, I am sure you may," he said gravely. "What is your name, *Kleine*?"

"Agnes-Maria. *Herr* Thomas says you are a great lord." Her frown deepened a little, and her tone held a certain dubious note, as though suspecting that she had been practiced upon.

"Ah ... something of the sort," Grey replied warily. "Why?"

She produced an inkhorn, a quill, and a copybook from the folds of her apron, set these on the table beside him, and opened the book to a blank page.

"I am to write down, you see, a page." She sighed at the enormity of the prospect, and turned her huge blue eyes reproachfully upon him, as though this drudgery were somehow his fault. "A page about some foreign country. But I do not remember what the schoolmaster said about France or Holland. *Herr* Thomas, though, says that you have been to *Schottland* and know everything about it. So, you see—" She flipped open the inkwell on the table and picked up her quill, very matter-of-fact. "You can tell me what you know, and I will write."

"How efficient," he said, smiling despite himself. "Very well. Let me think how to begin.... Perhaps we should say first where Scotland is? Yes, that seems right. 'Scotland lies to the north of England.'

"It is cold there?" the girl inquired, writing carefully.

"Very cold. And it rains incessantly. Let me spell 'incessantly' for you...."

A pleasant half hour spent in Scotland with Agnes-Maria left him, if not calmer, at least distracted, and he went to bed and fell asleep, to dream of cold, high mountains and the smoke of a fire in the Carryarick Pass.

Chapter 29



Dawn of Battle

He woke suddenly from a place beyond dreams, Tarleton's excited face an inch from his own.

"Sir! We've found them! It's starting!"

It was. All around him, officers were rolling from their beds, pulling curling papers from their hair, cursing and stumbling barefooted, calling for servants, ale, and chamber pots.

Tom was already there, jerking Grey's nightshirt unceremoniously off over his head and pulling his shirt over it in almost the same motion.

"Where?" he demanded of Tarleton, his head popping out of the neck. He jerked the garment into place, Tom already stooping with his breeches.

"Behind the dyke thing, the Land-ware." Tarleton was dancing on his toes with impatience. "We saw them—me and another scout who was in the church spire. The sky started to get light and there they were, creeping along the back of the dyke like skulking cowards!" His face shone under a sprinkling of soft, fair whiskers.

"Well done, Mr. Tarleton." Grey smiled, tucking his shirt into his breeches. "Go and shave. Then fetch Mr. Brett, see to my horse, and eat something. Both of you eat something. I'll join you—ouch!" Tom's hands paused in their hurry to untangle the snag of hair his brush had just encountered. "I'll join you at the stable. Go!" He made a shooing motion and Tarleton shot out of the room like a flushed hare.

"Speak of shaving, me lord ..." Tom's deft hands set by the hairbrush, and reached for the pot of shaving soap, the badger-bristle brush stirring up the foam with a scent of lavender.

Sitting on the bed as Tom shaved him, briskly plaited his hair, and bound it up, Grey wondered where young Agnes-Maria was. Probably moving hastily behind the English lines with her family. If Clermont's main body was indeed skulking behind the *Landwehr*, the French artillery was very likely within range of Hückelsmay—and the French were no respecters of private property.

"Here, me lord." Tom thrust a pistol into his hands, then bent to fasten his sword belt. "It's not loaded yet. D'ye want your cartridge box, or will one of your boys take it?"

"I'll have it. Shot bag, powder ..." He touched the items attached to his belt, checking, then thrust his arms back into the leather jerkin Tom was holding for him, the one he wore in lieu of the usual waistcoat on battlefields.

He was aware that some of the English junior officers considered this garment mildly contemptible, but then, relatively few of them had been shot at yet. Grey had, repeatedly. It wouldn't save him from close fire, but the fact was that most of the French muskets had a very short range, and thus a good many musket balls were near spent by the time they reached a target. You could see them, sometimes, sailing almost lazily through the air, like bumblebees.

Coat, epaulets, gorget, laced hat ... roll. Tom, always prepared, had thrust a crusty German roll into his hand, thickly buttered. Grey crammed the last of it into his mouth, shook crumbs from his lapels, and washed it down with coffee—one of the other orderlies had brewed some over a spirit lamp, the smell of it bracing.

Tom was circling him, eyes narrowed in concentration, lest he miss some vital detail of appearance. His round freckled face was anxious, but he said nothing. Grey touched him gently on the shoulder, making him look up.

"Me lord?"

"Thank you, Tom. I'll go now." The jumble had almost sorted itself out. Officers were thundering down the wooden staircase, shouting to one another, calling for their ensigns, and the air was filled with the scents of coffee, powder, heel black, hot hair, pipe clay, and a strong odor of fresh piss, both from the chamber pots and from the urine-soaked lumps of stale bread the orderlies used to bring up the shine on gold lace.

Tom swallowed, and stood awkwardly back.

"I'll have your supper for you, me lord."

"Thank you," Grey repeated, and turned to go. He'd reached the door when he heard Tom cry out behind him.

"Me lord! Your dagger!"

He slapped at his waist in reflex, and found the place empty. He whirled on his heel to find Tom there, dagger in hand. He took it with a nod of thanks, and turning, ran down the stairs, tucking the knife into its sheath as he went.

His heart was thumping. In part from the natural atmosphere of excitement that attends a looming battle, in part from the thought

that he might have found himself on the field without his dagger. He'd carried it since he was sixteen, and would have felt unarmed without it, pistol and sword notwithstanding.

The fact that he'd forgotten it, he thought, was not a good sign, and he touched the wire-wrapped hilt in an attempt to reassure himself.



Outside, the pigs were still snoring, both river and ditch invisible in a shroud of mist so thick that Grey wondered how the lookouts had ever seen the French troops. The air was fresh, though, with a spattering rain that came and went, and the weather did nothing to allay the spirits of the men.

He rode slowly through the forming columns, Brett and Tarleton foaming with excitement behind him. He felt the same excitement pulse through his own limbs—felt it in waves, coming off the men as they hurtled into position, clanking and cursing.

How does it work? his father had written in his campaign journal, after Sheriffmuir. How do emotions transmit themselves between men, with no gesture, no slightest word spoken? Whether it be confidence and joy, despair, or the fury of attack, there is no evidence of its spread. It is just suddenly there. What can be the mechanism of this instantaneous communication? Grey didn't know, but he felt it.

"Hoy!" he shouted at the retreating back of a bareheaded soldier. "Hoy, Andrews! Lose something?"

He unhooked the calvary saber he carried and leaned down, neatly catching up the battered tricorn on its point before the hat could be trampled. It clinked; Andrews, like many of the infantry, had crisscrossed the inside of his hat with iron strips, the better to turn a blow.

Nudging Karolus through the throng, Grey deposited the hat neatly on Andrews's startled head, provoking gales of laughter from the man's companions. Grey bowed nonchalantly, accepting their salutes, and making no effort to hide his own amusement. It was like wine, the air before a battle, and they were all drunk with anticipation.

They looked well, he thought with approval. Rough, by comparison to the burnished Prussians, but brimming with uncouth spirits and an open desire for the fight.

"Corporal Collet!" he bellowed, and thirty heads snapped round in

his direction. The largest—and best—of the companies under his command, he had managed to keep Collet's company together for more than two years, drilled and brought on with such skill as essentially to act as a single entity. A sight to delight a commander's heart.

"Sir!" Collet barked, bounding up beside him.

"Take your company to the front, Corporal. Form on the left; you're the pivot. Wheel on Captain Wilmot's signal."

"Sir, yes, sir!" Collet's seamed face beamed at the honor, and he bounded back to his men, barking orders. The men cheered, and went off at the trot, shoulder to shoulder, like a flock of particularly bloodthirsty sheep.

Noise. Complete confusion, but an orderly confusion. Corporals shouting their companies into order, lieutenants and captains roving to and fro on horseback, minding their divisions. And the hussars who served as messengers, darting swiftly through the throng like minnows through the slow-moving shoals of reddish fish.

A pig burst suddenly out of the shredding mist and galloped in panic through a distant company, causing whoops and shrieks. One of the German officers shot it, and a small band of harpies rushed through the forming ranks to fall upon it with their knives, making the soldiers step round them. Grey sighed, knowing he would at some point be presented with a bill for that pig.

German camp followers. These women—some prostitutes, some wives, and half of them vicious slatterns, regardless of legal status—clung like cockleburs to the army's arse, following closely even into battle, ready to loot and plunder at the slightest opportunity. God help anyone who fell in their path, Grey thought, watching the butchery.

The sound of bugling cut through the thick air, and Karolus flung back his head with a snort. Grey felt a sudden sharp pang; he would so much have wished to share this with Percy. But there was no time for regret. The army was on the move.



There was no question of stealth. Duke Ferdinand's combined forces numbered something in excess of thirty-two thousand troops, the French and Austrians forty-seven thousand. It was a straightforward matter, insofar as anything done by an army could be so described, of speed, force, tactics—and will.

A young hussar dashed up to Grey, brimming with excitement and self-importance, delivering a note.

Luck, it said.

Grey smiled and stuffed the note in his pocket. He had sent his own, identical note to Hal a few minutes before. It was their habit, when possible, to wish each other luck before a battle. He valued Hal's wishing him luck the more, because he knew Hal did not believe in it.

Duke Ferdinand's plan was novel, and daring: infantry to swing out and encompass the French left flank, the Prussian cavalry to press the advantage, artillery advancing into position to pin the divisions on the right. And the 46th to be in the van of the flanking maneuver.

He chose to carry a cavalry saber, rather than the customary officer's hanger, both because he liked the weight and because it was more visible. He raised it now and bellowed, "Advance by company! Quick ... March!"

Brett and Tarleton took up the cry, which spread to the sergeants and through the lines, and the columns began to move with amazing speed, churning the ground to black mud.

The fog drifted in patches over the marshy ground, but did not clear. In spite of the intermittent rain—repeated bellows of "Keep your powder dry, God damn your eyes!" rang from every quarter of the field in various languages—it was not a cold day, and the men, while damp, were cheerful.

Near the *Landwehr*, he pulled Karolus a little to the side, watching his men stream by, listening to the noises becoming audible from the French and Austrian lines forming on the other side of the dyke. The *Landwehr* itself was a formidable barrier—two water-filled ditches, each some ten feet wide, with a massive central bank, fifteen feet in width, between them—but not a very wide one. A thick growth of trees and bushes edged the dyke here; he couldn't see the enemy through mist and leaves, but he could hear them easily—French, he thought.

Shouts, cheers, the distant creak of caisson wheels as artillery wheeled into position ... then these were drowned in the boom of drums, as Ferdinand's Prussian cavalry came within earshot on Grey's side of the *Landwehr*, led by their drum horse. Dragon-Riders, they called themselves, with that typical German inclination for drama. They looked it, though. Tall men all, straight in the saddle and

beautiful in their glory, and his heart was stirred, despite himself.

Karolus was stirred, too; he jerked, snorted, and made as though to join them. He had once been a cavalry horse—loved drums and adored parades. Grey reined him in, but the stallion continued to dance and toss his head.

Karolus was stirring up the ensigns' horses, too, and Grey was not sure that Brett and Tarleton could keep their own mounts under control. Clicking his tongue, he pulled Karolus's head round, and rode a little way into the trees along the *Landwehr*, trailed by his ensigns.

He could still hear the cavalry drums, but the horses had quieted a little, with the others out of sight. Brett's horse bobbed his head, wanting to drink from the ditch, and Grey nodded at Brett to allow it.

"Not too much," he said automatically, his attention divided between the sounds behind them and those to his left, where the other British regiments were massing to attack the French right flank. The double ditches of the *Landwehr* were full to the banks, swelled by the recent rains, and the water ran muddy and quick below him, grass trailing in the current.

"What's that?" he heard Brett say, startled, and looked where his ensign was pointing. Several tall, pointed shapes were dimly visible among the trees on the other side of the dyke. He blinked, and made sense of what he was seeing just as one of the shapes flung back its arm and hurled something in his direction.

"Grenades!" he roared. "Get clear, get clear!"

The first one struck a few feet to his right and exploded, sending pottery shards in all directions. Some struck Karolus, who shied violently, then bucked and reared as more grenades struck the bank between the ditches—bright flashes from the ones that went off, others rolling like fallen apples, smothered and harmless in the dirt, a few with live fuses hissing like snakes.

Grey grappled the reins in one hand, fumbling for his pistol. There was a sudden feeling of warmth down his face, the sting of blood running into one eye. He got the pistol and fired blind. There were bangs nearby and the smell of powder; Brett and Tarleton were firing, too.

A thunder of hooves; Brett's mount, riderless, fled past Grey. Where ...? He glanced round—there. Brett had been thrown, was rising from the ground, smeared with mud.

"Get back!" Grey shouted, pulling Karolus's head around. The grenadiers were pulling back, too, out of pistol range, but one lucky

last throw landed a live one in the grass at Brett's feet, a blue-clay sphere, fuse sparking.

The boy stared at it, transfixed.

In sheer reflex, Grey spurred the horse and made for Brett, struck him glancing, and knocked him away. No time to think, to swerve—Karolus shifted suddenly, bunching under him, and jumped the ditch. Hit the bank with a jolt that jarred Grey's teeth, flexed once more and leapt the second ditch, skidding and floundering as he landed in wet grass, flinging his hapless rider up onto his neck.

A hand grabbed Grey's arm and wrenched him off the horse. He fell, struggling, throwing elbows and knees in all directions, tore loose and rolled, yelling, "Lauf! Lauf!"

A yelp from the man who had grabbed for Karolus's bridle, then the drumming of hooves as the horse galloped off into the mist. Grey had no time to worry about him; the grenadier who'd pulled him off was crouching, a wary look on his face and a dagger in his hand. Three or four more lurked behind him, wide-eyed with surprise.

"Surrender," the grenadier said in French. "You are my prisoner."

Grey hadn't breath to spare in reply. He'd dropped his saber in the fall, but it lay on the ground, a few feet away. Gasping and swallowing, he gestured briefly to the grenadier for patience, walked over, and picked up the sword. Then he gulped air, swung it two-handed round his head, and, lunging forward, struck at the grenadier's neck with the fixed intent of removing his head. He halfway succeeded, and the shock of it nearly dislocated every bone in his arms.

The grenadier fell backward, the spurting blood from his neck failing to obscure the look of total astonishment on his face. Grey staggered, barely kept a grip on his sword, but knew that to lose it was to die on the spot.

Two of the grenadiers fell to their knees, trying to aid their stricken comrade. Another was backing away, mouth open beneath his mustache in horrified surprise. And the last, God damn him, was shrieking for help, meanwhile rummaging frantically in his bag. Grey began to back away, bloody saber at the ready.

Grenadiers weren't schooled in hand-to-hand combat; they didn't normally need to be. But there were plenty of troops nearby who were, and dozens of them would arrive in seconds. Grey dashed a sleeve across his face, trying to clear the blood from his eye. His scalp was stinging now; a shard from the first grenade must have struck

him.

Meanwhile, the grenadier had drawn two more grenades from his bag, clay spheres each the size of an orange, filled with gunpowder. He carried a coil of hissing slow-match in a brass tube at his belt; the smoke from it wreathed his features, and he coughed, but didn't blink.

Black eyes fixed on Grey, he touched the fuses of the grenades to the slow-match, one and then the other. Sweat and blood were running down Grey's face, stinging his eyes.

Jesus. At six feet, he could scarcely miss. Grey saw the man's lips move, counting.

Grey turned and ran for his life. There was a roar of voices behind him, and the loud sharp *pop!* of an exploding grenade. Small objects pinged hard against his back and thighs, stung his legs but failed to penetrate the leather jerkin.

They were all after him now. He could hear the thump of feet and grunts of effort as they heaved their grenades. Terror lent wings to his feet, and he zigzagged frantically through the trees, the *flash-bang* of explosions shaking the bushes and driving rooks and blackbirds shrieking into the clouds above.

He skidded to a halt and nearly fell. Oh, Christ.

A company of French infantry turned surprised faces toward him, then, as comprehension dawned, several of them slung the muskets from their shoulders and began hastily to load. No way past them. Beyond them ... beyond them lay rank upon rank upon rank of soldiers, a serried mass of blue and white.

A tremendous boom seemed to shake the trees, and a cannonball smashed through the brush on the far side of the dyke, no more than a hundred yards from where he stood. The battle had begun.

Lord John Grey sketched a gesture of salute toward the startled infantry, turned right, and amid a belated hail of musket balls and the occasional grenade, scrambled up the bank, and jumped into the *Landwehr*.



He couldn't swim. Not that it mattered. He was wearing more than a stone's weight of equipment, and he sank like a stone, bubbles gushing up through his clothes. Hit the muddy bottom. Bent his knees in panic and jumped, to rise no more than a foot or so. Sank back and

felt his boots sink deep in the silt. He struggled blind in the murky water, tried frantically to shuck his coat, realized finally that he was still gripping his sword, and dropped it. His chest burned, swelling with the vain, irresistible desire to breathe.

He got the coat half off, and churned what breath there was in his lungs up and down the column of his throat, in hopes of extracting the last vestige of air from it. Scrabbled for the buckle of his belt, couldn't get it loose, went back to yanking at his coat. Could hold his precious breath no longer, and let it go in a blubbering, bubbling cloud of relief and regret.

He was still mindlessly trying to get the damned coat off. It was stuck, wrenched askew over his shoulders, and he thrashed about in suffocating frenzy, fighting the murk, the mud, the weight of the water, the coat, the heavy boots, his straining chest, his goddamn cartridge box, for Christ's bloody sake, whose strap had got round his neck and was going to strangle him before he drow—bloody hell!

Something struck his hand, hard. Panicked images of sharks, fish teeth, blood—he jerked back.

Idiot, he thought, with what faint vestige of sanity remained in his darkening mind. *You're in a fucking ditch.*

And with that, reached out quite calmly and took hold of the thing his hand had struck. A tree root, curving out of the bank. Waved his other hand gently around, found a bloody tangle of roots—mats and strings and woody stems, a fucking plethora of roots. Pulled the cartridge box off over his head, dropped it, took a good grip, pulled one boot from the muck, and began to climb.

His face broke the surface in a rush of air so glorious that he didn't care whether that breath might be his last.

He clung like a snail for several minutes, limbs trembling and heart pounding from the struggle, just breathing. Then, as his mind cleared, he realized that he had come up beneath an overhanging shelf of grassy earth. If any marksmen lingered on the bank above, it was no matter; he was invisible.

There was a lot of noise near at hand, but none of it directly overhead, and from what he could make out, none of it concerned with him. Orders were being shouted in French; the infantry company above was about to depart. He put his forehead against the cool mud of the bank and closed his eyes, waiting. Breathing.



He regretted the loss of his saber. The pistol was still in his belt, God knew how—but soaked and useless. That left the dagger as his only usable weapon. Though given his position, he reflected, it probably didn't matter.

He was on the wrong side of the *Landwehr*, crouched under a bush, sodden and cold, with several thousand enemy soldiers a few dozen yards away. No, it didn't matter much.

Cautious peeping through the bushes, together with what he could hear, gave him a general notion of the shape of the battle. Most of the artillery was to his left—the French right flank. The cannon were firing sporadically from both sides, still estimating range. A good deal of noise in the distance to his right, and brief clouds of powder smoke rising white as volleys were fired. Not a lot; no real engagement there yet. The ruse had worked, then; Clermont had been taken by surprise. Drums in the distance, a brief tattoo. The cavalry was still moving.

So Ferdinand's troops were on their way around the left flank, as planned, the French and Austrians caught in confusion, trying to turn to meet the attack. That was where he *ought* to be, commanding his men, in the thick of it. He glanced above him at the opposite bank in frustration—empty. God knew what was happening. Brett and Tarleton must have rushed off at once to tell someone—who? he wondered. His blood ran cold at the thought of Ewart Symington taking his command. He could only hope that the two ensigns had got to his brother first.

He didn't bother worrying about what Hal would do to him. If he survived long enough to see his brother again, he'd think about it then.

Three choices: sit here shivering and hope no one stumbled over him; walk out and surrender to the nearest French officer, if he managed to do that without being killed first; or try to make it to the end of the *Landwehr*, where he could cross the canal and rejoin his own troops.

Right. One choice. He hesitated for a moment, wondering whether to discard his sodden red coat, but in the end, kept it. Coatless, he'd likely be shot for a deserter by either side, and it was possible that someone on the English side would spot him and lend aid.

His scalp was tender and still oozing—his fingers came away red when he prodded it—but at least blood wasn't pouring down his face

anymore. With a last reconnaissance, he left the shelter of his bush, crawling through the thin screen of foliage.

He wanted desperately to go right, to find his own men. But they were nearly a mile away by now, and already fighting, if all was well. To the left, it was no more than two hundred yards to the near end of the *Landwehr*, and from what he could hear, the fighting there was mostly artillery. Much safer for a single man, moving on foot; if he didn't get close enough to a French gun crew for them to shoot him with their pistols, the odds of being struck by a random cannonball were reasonably low.

All went well, bar minor alarms, until he came in sight of the footbridge that crossed the canal at the end of the *Landwehr*. A group of women was sitting on it, watching the battle with avid attention.

Camp followers by their dress, and speaking German—but he couldn't distinguish their accents as Prussian or Austrian, God damn it. If they were Prussian, they likely wouldn't molest a British officer. Austrian, though—he remembered that pig, and the women's sharp knives. Only a couple of hours since the pig had died; it seemed much longer.

He tightened his face into a forbidding glower, put a hand on his useless pistol, and walked toward the women. They fell silent, and five pairs of eyes fixed on him, sharp and bright with calculation. One of them smiled and curtsied to him—but her eyes never left him, and he felt the ripple of anticipation run through the others.

"Guten Tag, mein Herr," she said. "You have been swimming?"

They all cackled, in a show of bad teeth and worse breath.

He nodded coolly to them, but didn't speak.

"What are you doing here, English pig?" another asked in German, smiling so hard that her cheeks bunched. "You are a coward, that you run from the fight?"

He stared blankly at her, nodded again. Two of them moved suddenly, as though to give him room to pass. Their hands were out of sight, buried in their skirts, and he could feel the excitement shivering in the air between them, a sort of fever that passed among them.

He smiled pleasantly at one as he passed, then took his hand off the pistol, bunched his fist, and punched her just under the jaw. The women all shrieked, save the one he'd hit, who simply fell backward over the low wall of the bridge. He ran, seeing from the corner of his eye the woman's skirt, belled like a flower, floating in the water.

Something went thunk! behind him, and he glanced back over his

shoulder. A large piece of ordnance had struck the bridge dead center—half the bridge was gone, and so were most of the women. One was left, staring at him from the far side, the water rushing past beneath her feet, her eyes and mouth round with shock.

He ran for the gun that had destroyed the bridge, trusting that his uniform would keep him from being shot. His lungs were laboring, the wet clothes weighing him down, but at least he was near his own lines.

It was a small battery, three cannon, one of the gun crews English—he saw the distinctive blue of the uniforms. No one was shooting at him, but active guns on the French side were keeping them busy; a cannonball hurtled past him, low and deadly, before crashing through a small tree, leaving the butchered stump quivering.

He was stumbling, barely able to breathe, but near enough. Near enough. He staggered to a halt and bent over, hands on his knees as he gasped for air. Men were shouting nearby, the rhythmic bark of a Prussian commander punctuated by an English voice, shrill with passion, screaming. He wasn't sure whether the screams were directed at the enemy or the English gun crew, and looked to see.

The crew. Something had happened to demoralize them—a heavy ball dropped within ten feet of him, sinking into the earth, and his flesh shook with the impact. Their lieutenant was shrieking at them, trying to rally them.... Grey wiped a sleeve across his face, and turned to look back across the river. The woman on the shattered bridge was gone.

A voice spoke suddenly behind him in a tone of absolute amazement, and he turned toward the lieutenant who had been screaming an instant before.

A cannonball came skipping across the ground like a stone across a pond, struck a buried rock, hopped high, and smashed through the lieutenant's head, removing it.

Blood fountained from the still-standing body, spraying several feet into the air. Ropes of blood lashed Grey's face and chest, blinding him, shocking hot through his wet clothes. Gasping, he dashed a sleeve across his eyes, clearing them in time to see the lieutenant's body fall, arms thrown wide in boneless grace. The sword he had been holding rolled from his grasp, silver in the grass.

Grey seized it in reflex, and whirled on the gun crew, who had begun to edge away from the smoking cannon. The bombardier with the linstock was nearest; Grey fetched the man a blow across the side of the head with the flat of his blade that sent him reeling back across the gun's barrel, then bounded at the rammer, who stared at him as though seeing Satan sprung from hell, eyes white and terrified in a sooty face.

"Pick it up!" Grey roared, stabbing the sword at the ramrod that lay fallen on the grass. "Do it, damn your eyes! You—back to your duty, God damn you—go back, I say!" One of the loaders had tried to slip past him. The man stopped, frozen, eyes rolling to and fro in panic, seeking escape.

Grey grabbed the man by the shoulder, pushed him half round, and kneed him in the buttocks, shouting. There was blood in his mouth; he choked and spat, kicked at the loader, who was fumbling halfheartedly at the pile of cartridges beneath a canvas sheet. The sponger had already fled; he could see the man's blue coat bobbing up and down as he ran.

Grey lunged in that direction by instinct, but realized that he could not pursue the deserter and turned instead ferociously on the remnant crew.

"Load!" he barked, and snatched the linstock from the bombardier, motioning the soldier to replace the man who had fled. Sponger and rammer fell to their work at once, with no more than a hasty glance at Grey, blood-soaked and vicious. The erstwhile bombardier was clumsy, but willing. Grey barked them through the maneuver, once, again, forcing them, guiding them, and then felt them begin to drop back into the accustomed rhythm of the work and pick up speed, gradually losing their terror in the encompassing labor of serving the gun.

His throat was raw. The wind whipped away half his words and what was left was barely intelligible—but he saw the crew respond to the lash of his voice, and kept shouting.

Cannon were firing close at hand but he couldn't tell whether they were friend or foe; clouds of black powder smoke rolled over them, obscuring everything.

His soaked clothes had gone cold again, and it was raining. He had taken the coil of smoking slow-match from the bombardier and tied it in its bag to his own belt. His fingers were stiff, clumsy; he had difficulty forcing the lighted fuse into the linstock, but forced himself to keep the rhythm, shouting orders in a voice that cracked like broken iron. Sponge. Vent. Load cartridge. Ram. Load wadding. Ram. Check vent. Powder. Fall back! And the hissing small flame at the end

of the linstock coming down toward the touchhole, sure and graceful, with no sense at all that his own hand guided it.

That moment of suspended animation and the crash and buck of the gun. The first one left him deafened; he knew he was still shouting only because his throat hurt. He snatched a lump of damp wadding from the ground and hastily crammed some of it into his ears. It didn't help much.

The rain grew momentarily heavier, cutting through the smoke and taste of blood with a freshness that eased his aching chest. The powder, was it covered? Yes, yes, the powder monkey was still at his post, a scorched-looking boy wide-eyed with fright but holding the canvas tight over the powder kegs, against the pull of the wind.

"Sponge piece!" he shouted, and heard the word muffled inside his skull as though it came from some vast distance, far away. "Load piece! Ram!"

He spared a moment to look before touching off the next shot—so far, he had been firing with not the slightest thought for attitude or effect—and forced himself not to blink as the gun went off with a jump like a live thing and the thunder that made you feel as though the ground shook, though in fact it was your own flesh shaking.

The shot soared high, came down a dozen yards short of a patch of French artillery—smoke sucked suddenly away by the wind, he saw the red of their uniforms and the belch of black smoke from the French gun's barrel. The shot came wide of his own position and he made a hasty calculation of wind, already shouting orders to adjust the trunnions, lower the barrel ... one degree? Two?

Now he saw the milling blur of white, green, and blue, infantry massing behind the French cannon.

Dare he try for that interesting maneuver whereby a cannonball was fired deliberately low, with the intent of bouncing repeatedly through an enemy phalanx? There was a seething mass of French and Austrian uniforms beyond the gun, perfect.... He would think the ground too soft with damp, save that he'd just seen the same technique employed successfully upon it. He gritted his teeth, but could not help but glance at the fallen lieutenant, noticing only now that the body had fallen at the foot of one of the stones marking the Stations of the Cross. "IX," it said, but he had no time to try to make out the picture on it.

"Five!" he shouted, an eye on the moving French line, "and one degree west!" The rammer at once jammed his rod in the barrel and

the powder monkey ran to lend his strength, as the loaders jerked out the trunnions and put them in again, then threw themselves against the cannon's limber, turning the barrel just enough ...

"Load!"

The rain came and went in gusty squalls; it had stopped for a moment and he wiped his face again on his sleeve, feeling some liquid —water, sweat, blood—drip down inside his coat from his queued hair.

"Fire!"

By God, it worked, and a cheer went up from his crew as they saw the ball hop murderously across the field, knocking Frenchmen down like ninepins as it went.

"Again, again!" he bellowed, striking his fist on the breech. The sponger was sponging like a maniac, not waiting for the order, and the loaders were already passing the next cartridge to the mouth.

"Down!" he shouted, and fell flat along with the crew as a shot in reply thudded into the ground six feet away. They rose up again, yelling like demons and shaking their fists. The French gun crew was hopping up and down like fleas, gleeful at the effect of their shot. Grey was obliged to bellow and slap one man across the back with the flat of his sword again to bring his own crew to their senses.

"Swivel! Swivel to bear on them! Hurry, damn you!"

Suddenly realizing their precarious position of opportunity and peril, his crew fell to like fiends, swinging the barrel to bear directly upon the French cannon. The French abruptly stopped cheering and began hastily to serve their own gun.

The French had the range already, were sure to beat them—Grey snatched the useless pistol from his belt and charged the French position, shrieking like a madman and waving both pistol and sword. The ground seemed to pitch and sway beneath his feet, a blur of grass and mud.

It was perhaps two hundred yards between the English and the French cannons. He was close enough to see the Frenchmen's mouths hanging open when their officer suddenly realized what Grey was about and groped madly for his own pistol. Grey promptly turned and ran like a hare back toward his own crew, leaping low bushes and zigzagging, seeking cover in the drifting rags of powder smoke. He couldn't tell whether the Frenchman was firing at him or no; the air cracked with random fire and the sound of bugles. Goddamned cavalry, he thought. Always in the bloody way—

"Duck!" came a faint cry, and he threw himself headlong in the sopping grass just as his own gun spoke near at hand. Without looking to see the possible effect of the shot, he scrambled up into a crouch and scuttled the rest of the way, arriving winded and wheezing to the cheers of his men.

"Once more," he panted. "Give it them again!"

The men were already at it; the linstock was thrust into his hand and he fumbled for the fuse, but his hand was shaking too badly to manage. The powder monkey seized the wobbling end of the slow-match and thrust it through the hole, slashing off the bit of fuse so hastily that the knife tip scratched Grey's hand, though he didn't feel it.

"Fall back!" he gasped, and lowered the hissing match to the touchhole.

There was an instant of breathless expectancy, and then the world disappeared in a blast of fire and darkness.



He woke to a sensation of drowning and gasped for air, then froze, gripped by a pain so intense that he actually *saw* it, as a physical entity separate from himself. A red thing, shot with black, pulsing and whirling like a pinwheel. Sharp—he felt his lungs bursting and had to breathe, would have screamed if he'd had any breath, the knife edge of the spinning thing slicing through his flesh like butter. It cut straight through his chest and pressed him to the ground with a crushing weight.

"Major! Major!"

Someone touched him, and he flung out a hand, blind, grappling for help, God, help, he couldn't *breathe* ...

Something smaller than the pain pushed him, hard, and he was suddenly on his side, doubled up, coughing, jerking in agony with each involuntary cough, but *had* to, couldn't not, couldn't stop, and spikes of air stabbed his chest coming in, as though he'd breathed in a mass of drawing pins, went out in a blinding sheet of white-hot pain and black smoke.

"Major!"

"Oh, shit, oh, shit!" someone said nearby.

He was in complete agreement with this, but couldn't say so. He

was still coughing, but not as much; saliva was running from his mouth, making runnels in the soot, and he seemed to be making a whimpering noise with each jerked breath.

Hands on him, he felt them, frantic thumps and grabs, pulling at his coat, his limbs. He made a frenzied noise of protest and felt bone ends grate—Christ, he *heard* them grate—and a mass of green and brown and blue and red spun past, and he realized dimly that his eyes were open.

He blinked, tears streaming, saw the black spikes of his clotted lashes and cold gray stone by his face.

Jesus Falls the Third Time, he thought. Poor bastard.

Someone was bellowing overhead, meaningless sounds. Cannon was thumping somewhere near; he felt the ground shake, felt his heart stop with each crash, and wished it would stop once and for all, it hurt so when it started again....

"Jesus! Look at the blood of him! He'll never last!"

"His arm, let me bind his arm—"

"No use, no use, it's blown clean off!"

"It's not, I saw his fingers move, back off—back off, I said, God damn your eyes!"

The voices seemed to come through a fog of noise, something rushing, like a waterfall that filled his ears. He still felt the thump of the guns, but that, too, had faded somehow, seemed safely distant. The pain had drawn in upon itself, and sat sullen in his chest, glowing like a lump of metal flung from a blacksmith's forge, molten and heavy.

He hoped his heart would not come too close to it. He could see his heart, too, a pulsing dark-red thing, almost black by contrast with the brilliant crimson of the pain.

They were saying something now about the gun—were they fighting the gun?—but he couldn't focus on the words; they all rushed past, part of a waterfall, loud in his ears. Water ... warm water. It was rushing over him, his clothes felt sodden, he could feel the trickle of it down his neck, over his ribs, the feel of wet cloth stuck to his belly.

"Oh, Jesus," said a voice above, despairing. "So much blood."



He was in a room somewhere, filled with light. Wounded, he'd been

wounded. By reflex, he grabbed for his balls. Their reassuring presence compensated in some measure for the rending pain that shot through his body with the movement, but it was still enough to make him gasp.

Something moved across the light, and someone bent over him.

"Me lord!" Tom Byrd's voice came loud in his ear, halfway between fright and hope. "Quick, quick! Get the earl—he's awake!"

"Earl?" Grey croaked. "What ... Hal?"

"Your brother, aye. He'll be right here, me lord, don't you trouble yourself. D'ye want water, me lord?"

He wanted water somewhat more than heaven, earth, or the riches of the fabled East. He was dimly aware of someone arguing about whether he should be allowed to have any, but his precious Tom snarled like a badger and elbowed whoever it was away.

Cool pottery touched his mouth, and he gulped, half choking.

"Slow, me lord," Tom said, moving the cup away, and put a hand behind his head to steady him. "Slow as does it. That's it, now. Lap it like a dog, now, just a bit at a time."

He lapped, urgent for more, trying to will the water into the parched tissues of his mouth and throat, tasting the faint silver of blood from a cracked lip. For a brief period of ecstasy, nothing existed save the bliss of drinking water. The cup was drawn away, though, and Tom lowered his head gently to the pillow, leaving him blinking at the ceiling, panting shallowly.

He'd ignored the pain in his chest and arm for the sake of water, but now realized that he could not draw a full breath. The left side of his body seemed encased in something solid, and he recalled quite suddenly hearing someone say that his arm had been blown off.

He jerked, trying to raise his head to look, and reached across his body with his right hand.

"Oh, Jesus!" Colored lights danced before his eyes and a cold sweat broke out on his body—but his left arm was there, thank God. It was still attached, though plainly not in good shape. He tried wiggling the fingers, which proved a mistake.

"Don't move, me lord!" Tom sounded alarmed. "You mustn't. Doctor says as it could kill you, if you move!"

He didn't doubt it. The pain was back, grimly sitting on his chest, driving the breath out of him, trying patiently to stop his heart.

He lay still, eyes closed and teeth gritted, breathing in sips of air. He could smell pigs, ripe and near at hand. It must be one of the farmhouses near the may.

"Tom. What ... happened?"

"They said the gun blew up, me lord. But the battle's won," he added, though Grey didn't really care at the moment. "Mr. Brett nearly drowned in the dyke, but Mr. Tarleton fished him out."

There were other people in the room now, he didn't know how many. Voices, murmuring gravely. Tom was babbling nonsense in his ear, in a patent attempt to keep him from hearing what was being said. He raised his right hand, but let it fall, too exhausted to try to shush Tom. Besides, he thought he didn't really want to hear what they were saying.

The voices stopped and went away. Tom fell silent, but stayed by him, dabbing sweat from his face and neck, now and then wetting his lips with water from the cup.

He could feel the fever starting. It was a sly thing, barely noticeable by contrast with the pain, but he was aware of it. He felt that he should fight, concentrate his mind to drive it back, but felt too tired to do anything but go on breathing, one short, shallow gasp at a time.

Perhaps he fell asleep, perhaps his attention only wandered. He was aware all at once that the voices were back, and Hal with them.

"All right, John?" Hal's hand took hold of his sound right arm, squeezing.

"No."

The hand squeezed harder.

"You see, my lord?" Another voice came from his other side. He cracked one eye open, far enough to see an earnest cove with a long face and a stern mouth, this downturned in displeasure at Grey's state —or perhaps his existence. The name popped into his mind, sudden as if the face had acquired a label—Longstreet. Mr. Longstreet, army surgeon.

"Shit," he said, and closed his eyes. Hal squeezed him again, evidently thinking this remark a response to the pain.

Another of the voices loomed up at the foot of the bed, this one speaking German. Burly sort in a green uniform, jabbing his finger at Grey in a definite sort of way.

"... must amputate, as I said."

He was barely lucid enough to hear this, and flapped the uninjured arm in a feeble attempt at defense.

"... rather die." Hoarse and cracked, it didn't sound like his voice, and for a moment, he wondered who'd said that. Hal was scowling at

him, though, attention momentarily diverted from the doctor.

The lining of his mouth stuck to his teeth, and he worked his tongue in a frantic effort to generate enough saliva to speak. His body convulsed in the effort and he reared up from the bed, fire roaring up the left side of his body.

"Don't ... let 'em," he said to his brother's swimming face, and fell back into darkness, hearing cries of alarm.

The next time he came round, it was to find himself bound to a bedstead. He checked hastily, but his left arm was still amongst those present. It had been splinted and wrapped in bandages and it hurt amazingly, much worse than the last time he'd been awake, but he wasn't inclined to complain.

He was mildly surprised to hear that the surgeons were all still arguing—in German, this time. One of them was insisting to Hal that it was futile, as "he"—Grey himself, he supposed—was undoubtedly going to die. Another—Longstreet, he thought, though he also spoke in German—was insisting that Hal must leave the surgeons to their work.

"I'm not leaving," Hal said, close by. "And he isn't dying. Are you?" he inquired, seeing that Grey was awake.

"No." Some kind soul had wetted his lips again; the word came out in a whisper, but it was audible.

"Good. Don't," Hal advised him, then looked up. "Byrd, go and guard the door. No one is to come in here until I say so. Do you understand?"

"Yes, me lord!" The hand on Grey's shoulder lifted and he heard Tom Byrd's boots hurrying across the floor, the opening and closing of the door.

It occurred to Grey, with complete calm and utter clarity, that it would be extremely convenient for a number of people—not least himself—if he were to die as a result of his injuries.

Percy? He felt no more than a dim ache at thought of Percy, but retained that odd clarity of thought. Most of all to Percy. Custis was dead. If he were to die, as well, there would be no one to testify at the court-martial, and such a charge could not be pressed without witnesses.

Would they let Percy go on that account? Probably so. His career would be finished, of course. But the army would vastly prefer to dismiss him quietly than to have the ballyhoo and scandal of a trial for sodomy.

"Do you suppose it was my fault, as he said?" he asked his father, who was standing beside the bed, looking down at him.

"I shouldn't think so." His father rubbed an index finger beneath his nose, as he generally did when thinking. "You didn't force him to do it."

"But was he right, do you think? Did he only do it because I couldn't give him what he needed?"

The duke's brows drew together, baffled.

"No," he said, shaking his head in reproof. "Not logical. Every man chooses his own way. No one else can be responsible."

"What's not logical?"

Grey blinked, to find Hal frowning down at him.

"What's not logical?" his brother repeated.

Grey tried to reply, but found the effort of speaking so great that he only closed his eyes.

"Right," Hal went on. "There are fragments of metal in your chest; they're going to remove them." He hesitated, then his fingers closed gently over Grey's.

"I'm sorry, Johnny," he said, low-voiced. "I don't dare let them give you opium. It's going to hurt a lot."

"Are ... you under th-the im ... pression that this is ... news to me?" The effort of speaking made his head swim and gave him a nearly irresistible urge to cough, but it lightened Hal's expression a bit, so was worth it.

"Good lad," Hal whispered, and squeezed his hand briefly, letting go then in order to fumble something out of his pocket. This proved, when Grey could fix his wavering gaze on it, to be a limp bit of leather, looking as though the rats had been at it.

"It was Father's," Hal said, tenderly inserting it between Grey's teeth. "I found it amongst his old campaign things. Ancestral teeth marks and all," he added, making an unconvincing attempt at a reassuring grin. "Don't know for sure whose teeth they were, though."

Grey munched the leather gingerly, just as pleased that its presence saved him the effort of further reply. The taste of it was oddly pleasant, and he had a brief memory of Gustav the dachshund, gnawing contentedly at his bit of beef hide.

The picture reminded him of other things, though—the last time he had seen von Namtzen and the bitter smell of the chrysanthemums, the still more bitter smell of Percy's sweat and the night-soil bucket—he turned his head violently, away from everything. And then there

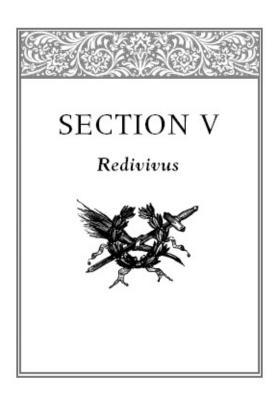
was a looming presence over him, and he shivered suddenly as the sheet was lifted away.

His attention was distracted by a snicking sound. He turned his head and saw Hal checking the priming on the pistol he had just cocked. Hal sat down on a stool, set the pistol on his knee, and gave Longstreet a look of cold boredom.

"Get on, then," he said.

There was a sudden chill as the dressing on Grey's chest was lifted, and he heard the sharp-edged hiss of metal and the surgeon's deep, impatient sigh. Hal's fingers tightened, grasping his.

"Just hold on, Johnny," Hal said in a steady voice. "I won't let go."



Chapter 30



A Specialist in Matters of the Heart

In early September, he returned to England, to Argus House. Once well enough to leave the field hospital at Crefeld, he had been sent to Stephan von Namtzen's hunting lodge, where he had spent the next two months slowly recuperating under the tender care of von Namtzen, Tom Byrd, and Gustav the dachshund, who came into his room each night, moaned until lifted onto the bed, and then settled down comfortingly—if heavily—on Grey's feet, lest his soul wander in the night.

Shortly after his return to England, Harry Quarry came to call, keeping up an easy flow of cordialities and regimental gossip that demanded little more of Grey than the occasional smile or nod in response.

"You're tired," Quarry said abruptly. "I'll go, let you rest a bit."

Grey would have protested politely, but the truth was that he was close to collapse, chest and arm hurting badly. He made to stand up, to see Quarry out, but his friend waved him back. He paused at the door, though, hat in hand.

"Have you heard much from Melton? Since you've been back, I mean?"

"No. Why?" Grey's arm ached abominably; he could barely wait until Harry departed and he could have Tom put the sling back on.

"I thought he might have told you—but I suppose he didn't want to hamper your recovery."

"Told me what?" The pain in his arm seemed suddenly less important.

"Two things. Arthur Longstreet's back in England; army surgeon—you know him?"

"Yes," Grey said, and his hand went involuntarily to his chest, the left side of it crisscrossed with barely healed weals. Tom, seeing it, had remarked that he looked as though he'd been in a saber fight. "What—did he say why Longstreet's here?" Why would Hal not have told him this?

"Invalided out," Quarry replied promptly. "Shot through the lungs at Zorndorf; in a bad way, I hear."

"Ah. Too bad," he said mechanically, but relaxed a little. Longstreet was no threat, then—if in fact he ever had been. Grey would like to go and talk to him, but doubtless Hal had assumed there was nothing urgent in the matter, and wanted to wait until he had returned from campaigning himself.

"Two things, you said." He recovered himself abruptly. "What was the second?"

Quarry gave him a look of profound sympathy, though his voice was gruff in reply.

"They've moved Wainwright back to England. The court-martial's not yet scheduled, but it will be, soon. Probably early October. I thought you should know," Harry added, more gently.

It was warm in the room, but gooseflesh rose on Grey's arms.

"Thank you," he said. "Where ... where is he now, do you know?" Harry shrugged.

"Small country gaol in Devonshire," he said. "But they'll likely move him to Newgate for the trial."

Grey wanted to ask the name of the town in Devonshire, but didn't. Better if he didn't know.

"Yes," he said, and struggled to his feet to see Harry out. "I—thank you, Harry."

Quarry gave him a grimace that passed for a smile, and with a small flourish, donned his hat and left.

"You all right, me lord?" Tom, who had never been farther than six feet from his side since Crefeld, came in with the sling for his arm, examining Grey with a look of worry. "Colonel Quarry's tired you out. You look pale, you do."

"I daresay," Grey said shortly. "I haven't been outdoors in three weeks. Here," he said, seized by sudden recklessness. "I'm going for a walk. Put that on, and fetch my cloak, please, Tom."

Tom opened his mouth to protest, but seeing the look on Grey's face, shut it and sighed.

"Very good, me lord," he said, resigned.

"And don't follow me!"

"No indeed, me lord," Tom said, fastening the sling with a little more force than strictly necessary. "I'll just wait for the rag-and-bone man to bring you home, after he picks you up in the street, shall I?"

That made Grey smile, at least.

"I'll come home on my own two feet, Tom, I promise."

"Pah," said Tom.

"Did you say, 'Pah'?" Grey inquired, incredulous.

"Certainly not, me lord." He swung Grey's cloak round his shoulders. "Enjoy your walk, me lord," he said politely, and stamped out.

The impetus of this conversation was sufficient to carry Grey as far as the edge of Hyde Park, where he leaned against a railing, waiting for his breath to come back. The wounds in his chest had healed fairly well, but any exertion made him feel as though his lungs were still riddled with bits of hot metal, and might fill with blood at any moment.

Early October. A month. Maybe less. Concerned with his own survival, he had managed not to think about anything for a time. And Minnie, Olivia, and Tom had gone to great lengths to be sure he was not exposed to anything upsetting; if Hal *had* mentioned Percy in any of his letters, he was sure Minnie had carefully suppressed the news.

He drew a shallow breath, breathed deeper, alert for rattling sounds in his chest, but there were none. Well, then. He straightened, taking his weight off the supporting railing. His arm was throbbing, despite the sling, but he ignored it. He had no idea what awaited him in October—but he would, as he'd promised Tom, go to it on his own two feet. Slowly, he began the journey round the park, the thought of Percy like iron fetters on his feet.



The christening of Cromwell Percival John Malcolm Stubbs took place a week later, within ten feet of his birthplace. Olivia, displaying the same streak of stubbornness—some called it perversity—that characterized the family, had insisted upon the child's name, and as her husband was not there to stop her, it was done.

"Do you mind?" she had said to Grey. "I won't do it, if you do. Melton would disapprove very much, I'm sure—but he isn't here to forbid it."

"Are you asking me as *de facto* head of the family?" he'd asked, smiling a little, in spite of the circumstances. She'd come to find him in the garden, where Tom forced him out to sit every afternoon, on the theory that it disturbed the household to know that he was still lying in his bed, staring at the ceiling.

"Of course not," Olivia had said. "I'm asking you because—well,

because."

He probably should have tried to stop her. It was a private christening, with just the family and a few close friends—but people would talk. Lucinda, Lady Joffrey, was the child's godmother; Sir Richard stiffened visibly when he heard the vicar pronounce the child's names and shot a sharp look at Grey.

Grey was proof against looks, though, and speech, as well. He walked in a protective blanket of soft gray fog that muffled everything and made him feel invisible.

Now and then, something unexpected would penetrate the fog, sharp and wounding as the bits of shrapnel left in his chest, which worked their way one by one to the surface. Last week, it had been Harry's visit. Today, it was the light.

It had been cloudy outside, but now the sun burst through, and a flood of colored light from a stained-glass window fell over the christening party in soft lozenges of red and blue and green.

The space at his side had been no more than an empty expanse of floor slates. Suddenly, it was an abyss.

He looked away, heart pounding and palms sweating, and saw Olivia looking at him, wearing an expression of concern. He nodded at her, forcing a smile, and she relaxed a little, her attention returning to the infant in Lucinda's arms.

He spoke the words of the baptismal vows automatically, not hearing them. The air shook around him with the echo of organ pipes and clashing swords, and sweat ran down his back.

Lucinda removed the child's lacy cap, and Cromwell Percival John Malcolm Stubbs's head protruded from the christening robes, round as a cantaloupe. Grey fought back an inappropriate urge to laugh, and in the same instant, felt the piercing pain of being unable to turn to Percy and see the same laughter in his eyes.

It wasn't even the right name. He'd thought of telling Olivia that, but hadn't. It might not be the only secret Percy still possessed, but it was the only one Grey could keep for him.

The date for the court-martial had been set: 13th October, at eleven in the morning. If they hanged Percy—on Grey's testimony—ought he to insist they do it as "Perseverance"?

Lucinda kicked him in the ankle, and he realized that everyone was looking at him.

"Say, 'I do believe,' " Lucinda said under her breath.

"I do believe," he said obediently.

"I baptize thee, Cromwell Percival John Malcolm, in the name of the Father ..."

The splash of water came to him, distant as rain.

I should have told her it was "Perseverance," he thought, in sudden panic. What if it's all that should be left of him?

But it was too late. He closed his eyes, and felt the soft fog come to wrap its comfort round him once again, the gray of it tinged with the light of saints and martyrs.



"You don't look well, John." Lucinda Joffrey circled round him, looking thoughtfully over her fan at him.

"You surprise me, madam," he said politely. "I made sure that I appeared the very picture of health."

She didn't reply to that feeble retort, but closed the fan with a snap and tapped him in the chest with it. He flinched as though she had stabbed him with a brooch-pin.

"Not. Well." She tapped him with each word, and he backed up sharply, to get away from her. The christening party was being held in the garden at Argus House, though, and his escape was prevented by the fishpond behind him.

"Look at him, Horry," she ordered. "What does he look like?"

"The Duchess of Kendal," Horace Walpole replied promptly. "When I last saw her, two days before her unlamented demise."

"Thank you, Mr. Walpole," Grey said, giving him a look.

"Not but that your lordship has much better *taste* than my lady Kendal." Walpole gave him back the look. "The color of your face, however, is not what I would choose myself, to complement the shade of your suit. It is not *quite* the complexion of one of my darlings"—he nodded toward a sherry decanter on a nearby table, in which he had brought several small goldfish from his house at Strawberry Hill, as a present for Minnie—"but approaching that hue."

"You must see a doctor, John," Lucinda said, lowering the fan and giving him the benefit of her lovely eyes, set in open distress at his condition.

"I don't want a doctor."

"There is a very good man of my acquaintance," Walpole said, as though struck by inspiration. "A specialist in weaknesses of the chest. I should be more than delighted to provide an introduction."

"How kind of you, Horry! I am sure anyone you recommend must be a marvel." Lucinda opened her fan in gratitude.

Grey, who was not so far gone as to be unable to spot gross conspiracy and very bad acting, rolled up his eyes.

"Give me the name," he said, in apparent resignation. "I shall write for an appointment."

"Oh, no need," Walpole said cheerfully. "Dr. Humperdinck expresses the keenest interest in making your acquaintance. I'll send my coach for you, at three o'clock tomorrow."

"And I," Lucinda put in swiftly, fixing him with a gimlet eye, "will be here to ensure that you get into it."

"Short of drowning myself in the fishpond, I see there is no escape," Grey said, with a sigh. "All right."

Lucinda looked flabbergasted, and then alarmed, at this sudden capitulation. In fact, he simply hadn't the strength to make more than a token resistance—nor, he discovered, did he really care. What did it matter?

"Mr. Walpole," he said, nodding toward the table, "I fear that my nephew Henry is about to drink your fish."

In the excitement occasioned by the rescue and subsequent ceremonious installation of the fish in their new home, Grey was able to make an inconspicuous departure, and went to sit in the library.

He was still there, an unread play by Molière open on his knee, when a shadow fell over him, and he looked up to see the Honorable Horace Walpole again. Walpole was a slight man, and much too frail in appearance to loom over anyone; he simply stood by Grey's chair.

"It is a terrible thing," Walpole said quietly, all affectation gone. "Yes."

"I spoke with my brother." That would be the Earl of Orford, Grey supposed; Walpole was the youngest son of the late prime minister, and had three brothers, but only the eldest had any influence—though a great deal less than his father had had.

"He cannot help before the trial, but ... if"—Walpole hesitated, ever so briefly, having obviously made a split-second decision to substitute "if" for "when"—"your ..." A longer hesitation.

"My brother," Grey said quietly.

"If he is condemned, the earl will make what recommendations he can toward clemency. And I do have ... other friends at court, though my own influence is not great. I will do what I can. I promise you

that, at least."

Walpole was not at all handsome, having a receding chin and a high, rather flat brow, but he was possessed of intelligent dark eyes, usually alive with interest or mischief. Now they were quiet, and very kind.

Grey couldn't speak. It was a risk for Walpole to be connected in any way with such an affair. He lived quietly, and his own affairs never came to public notice, nor ever would. For him to sacrifice his discretion so far as to involve himself in what would be a notorious case was a remarkable gesture, and Grey was not a personal friend, though Walpole's father had of course been a close friend to the duke.

He doubted that Walpole knew or suspected anything regarding his own nature, let alone his relationship with Percy. Even if he did, he would never speak of it, no more than Grey would mention Thomas Gray, the poet who had been Walpole's lover for years.

He put up his hand, and gripped Walpole's for an instant in thanks. Walpole smiled, a sudden, charming smile.

"Do go and see Humperdinck," he said. "He will do you good, I am sure of it."



He had felt the name "Humperdinck" vaguely familiar, but had not at first recollected its associations, and was thus surprised to find himself face to face with the gentleman he had last seen in a state of prostration on the sofa at White's, half frozen and wig askew, suffering the effects of some seizure.

Dr. Humperdinck was now pink and healthy, showing only traces of his misadventure: a slight hesitation of speech, a drooping left eyelid, and a dragging left foot that caused him to walk with a stick. He laid this object aside and sat down in his consulting room, bidding Grey do likewise.

"Lord John Grey," he said, looking his new patient over with thoughtful, clear blue eyes. "I know you, do I not? But I cannot recall the occasion of our meeting. I hope you will pardon my lack of manners—I suffered an accident last winter, an apoplexy of sorts, and since have discovered that my memory is not what it once was."

"I recall the occasion," Grey said, smiling. "It was on the pavement outside White's."

The doctor blinked, astonished.

"Was it? You were present?"

"Yes, my brother and myself."

The doctor seized his hand and wrung it.

"My dear sir! I am so happy to meet you again. Not only for the natural pleasure of the occasion, but because I *do* remember you! I had thought all memory of the evening of my accident quite gone—and here is a piece of it after all! Bless me, sir, you have given me hope that perhaps other memories may also return in time!"

"I'm sure I hope they will," Grey said, smiling. The doctor's patent joy at remembering eased his own melancholy for a moment—though there were many things he would himself prefer to forget.

"You do not recall where you were going that night?" Grey asked curiously, taking off his coat and unfastening his shirt at the doctor's request. Humperdinck shook his head, fumbling in his pocket.

"No, I have not ..." He straightened up, a small sharp instrument of some sort in his hand and a look of astonishment on his face.

"White's," he whispered, as though to himself. Then his gaze sharpened, returning to Grey with renewed excitement.

"White's!" he cried, seizing Grey's hand once again and disregarding the presence of the instrument in his own hand.

"Ouch!"

"Oh, I do beg your pardon, sir, have I cut you? No, no, all is well, no more than a slight nick, a bandage will fix it.... They told me I had been found outside White's Chocolate House, of course, but hearing you speak the name, in your own voice—White's!" he exclaimed again in glee. "I was going to White's!"

"But—" Grey caught himself in time from saying, "But you are not a member there," for if he had been, Holmes, the club's steward, would have recognized the doctor at once. "Were you meeting someone there?" he asked, instead.

The doctor pursed his lips, thinking fiercely—but gave it up within a moment as a bad job.

"No," he said regretfully, fishing a clean bandage from his drawer. "I suppose that I must have been, but I have no recollection of it. But if so, surely the gentleman I was going to meet would have recognized me? Ah, well, I must just let it be; perhaps more memories will return to me of their own accord. Patience is a great virtue, after all," he said philosophically.

Half an hour later, he had finished his examination, conducted with

the most cordial and attentive questions, and returned to his earlier statement of principle.

"Patience, Lord John," he said firmly. "Patience is the best medicine, in almost all cases; I recommend it highly—though it is surprising how few people are able to take that particular medicine."

He laughed jovially. "They think that healing must come from blade or bottle—and sometimes it does, sometimes it does. But for the most part, I am convinced that the body heals itself. And the mind," he added thoughtfully, with a sideways glance at Grey that made him wonder uncomfortably just how much of his own mind the doctor had perceived in the course of their conversation.

"So you do not feel that the remaining fragments are dangerous?" he asked, buttoning his shirt.

The doctor made a moue of professional equivocation.

"One can never say for certain about such things, Lord John—but I think not. I hope not. I believe the occasional pain you suffer is only the result of an irritation of the nerves—quite harmless. It should pass away, in time."

"In time," Grey muttered to himself, on the way back to Argus House. That was well enough, so far as his body was concerned. Being assured that he was likely not about to die had worked wonders; he felt no pain at all in either chest or arm. But as for his mind ... there, time was growing very short indeed.

Chapter 31



Nota Bene

Grey found himself improved in spirits after his visit to Humperdinck, but still at loose ends. Not yet healed enough to return to his duties, and lacking any useful occupation, he drifted. He would set out for the Beefsteak, and find himself wandering round the edge of Hyde Park or suddenly among the shouts of costermongers in Covent Garden. He would sit down to read, and come to himself an hour later to find the fire burnt down to embers and the book on his knee, still open at the first page.

It was not melancholy. That abyss was still visible to him, but he resolutely looked away from it, back turned to its beckoning verge. This was something different; a sense of suspended animation, as though he was waiting for something without which he could not continue his life—and yet with no idea what that something might be, and no notion how to find it.

His daily correspondence these days was scanty; those friends who had expressed sympathy and extended invitations upon his return had been discouraged by his continued refusals, and while a few stubborn souls continued to call or write—Lucinda Joffrey, for one—they left him alone for the most part.

He therefore looked at the letter the butler laid beside his plate with a faint curiosity. It didn't bear an official seal, thank God, or have the look of anything pertaining to the regiment. If it had, he reflected, he should have been tempted to put it into the fire. He daily expected notification of Percy's court-martial—or his death—and feared to read either one.

As it was, he waited until the meal was finished, and took the letter with him out into the garden, where he finally opened it beneath a copper beech. It was from Dr. Humperdinck; he caught sight of the signature, and would have crumpled the letter in disgust, had he not also caught sight of the opening sentence.

I have remembered, it began simply.

Grey sat down slowly, letter in hand.

My dear Lord John—

I have remembered. Not everything, assuredly; there are still considerable lacunae in my recollection. But I recalled quite suddenly this morning the name of the man I was to meet at White's. It was Arthur Longstreet, and I have it firmly in my mind that I was called to a medical consultation with him.

My mind is unfortunately still a blank, though, with regard to the matter he desired to consult me upon, and also to his occupation and address.

I think I have not met him, as I have no face to attach to this name, and thus must have been summoned by letter—though if that be the case, it is not among my correspondence.

Are you by chance acquainted with Mr. Longstreet? If so, I should be very much obliged if you would send me his direction, that I might write and explain matters. I hesitate to impose upon you, but since I have the impression that it was a medical matter, I did not wish to make inquiries at White's and thus perhaps expose Mr. Longstreet's privacies inadvertently. Of course, if you do not know the gentleman, I shall do that, but I dare to presume upon our acquaintance and your good nature to begin with.

With my greatest thanks, I remain Your obt. servant,

Henryk van Humperdinck

Grey was still sitting under the copper beech when one of the footmen came out with a tea tray.

"My lord? Mrs. Stubbs says you will take some refreshment." Grey was preoccupied, but not so much so as not to notice the firmly directive phrasing of this particular statement.

"Does she?" he said dryly. He picked up the cup and sniffed cautiously. Chamomile. He made a face and poured it into the perennial bed.

"Do thank my cousin for her kind solicitude, Joe." He stood up, picked up one of the pastries, discovered it to be filled with raspberries, and put it back. Raspberries made him itch. He took a piece of bread and butter, instead.

"And then have the coach brought round, please. I have a call to

Longstreet's house was a modest one. Men of means did not become army surgeons, and while Longstreet's cousin was evidently able to place twenty-thousand-pound wagers, Grey noted, the doctor's branch of the family must be significantly less wealthy.

He had never heard whether Longstreet was married. A middle-aged female servant admitted him, looking surprised, and pottered off in search of the doctor, leaving Grey in a small, neat parlor whose walls, shelves, and cases held the souvenirs of a man who had spent much of his life abroad: a set of German beer steins, a trio of French enameled snuffboxes, a series of case knives inlaid with elaborate marquetry, four grotesque masks, garishly decorated with paint and horsehair, whose origin he did not recognize.... Evidently, Longstreet liked matched sets.

Grey hoped this tendency implied a desire on the doctor's part for completeness.

A halting step and a wheezing breath announced the arrival of the artifacts' owner. Longstreet was diminished physically, Grey saw, but still himself. Normally lean, he was thinner now, the bones of face and wrist sharp as blades, and his skin gone a strange shade of gray that seemed faintly blue in the rainy light of the window. The doctor leaned heavily on a stick, and his housekeeper watched him with a certain tenseness of body that suggested he might fall, but she made no move to help him, though from her face she would have liked to.

The eyes, though, were unchanged: clear, a little angry, half amused. Not at all surprised.

"How are you, Lord John?" he asked.

"Well, I thank you." Grey inclined his head. "And I do thank you," he added politely. "I gather that you are in large part responsible for my survival." Whether you meant to be or not, he thought.

Longstreet nodded, and eased himself down into an armchair, from the depths of which he surveyed Grey sardonically.

"You were ... somewhat more fortunate than I." He touched his laboring chest briefly. "Bullet through ... both lungs."

"I regret to hear it," Grey said, meaning it. Longstreet gestured toward the other chair, and he pulled it forward and sat down.

"Have you consulted Dr. Humperdinck regarding your condition?" he asked. It was as good an opening as any.

Longstreet raised one iron-gray brow.

"Humperdinck? Me? Why?"

"He is an expert in conditions of the chest, is he not?"

Longstreet stared at him for a moment, then began to wheeze in an alarming manner.

"Is ... that what ... they ... told you?" he managed at last, and Grey realized that he was laughing. "Who-whoever sent you to him?"

"Yes," Grey said, becoming mildly irritated. "He is not?"

Longstreet suffered a brief coughing fit, and clapped a handkerchief to his mouth, shaking his head.

"No," he wheezed at last, and breathed heavily for a moment before continuing. "He is a specialist in mental disorders, par-particularly those of a melancho-cholic disposition." Longstreet looked him over, openly amused. "Was he of ... help?"

"Oddly enough, yes." Grey kept any hint of an edge from his voice, suppressing a burst of annoyance at Lucinda Joffrey. "He sent me to you."

"He did?" The sharp gray eyes went suddenly wary. "Why? He does not know me."

"No?" Grey thought it politic not to describe Dr. Humperdinck's disordered memory—just yet. "Then why did you summon him to meet you at White's, on the evening when I first met you there?"

His own mind had been momentarily disordered by the revelation of Humperdinck's specialty, but was now working again. In fact, his sense of reason had suddenly reasserted itself, after what seemed months of absence, and the sheer relief of being able to think logically again was like water in the desert.

Longstreet had pressed the handkerchief to his mouth again, and was coughing, but it was apparent to Grey that this was no more than a gambit to gain time in which to think—and he did not propose to allow such advantage.

"You did not—I am sure—seek his professional opinion with regard to yourself," he said. "So it was for someone else. Someone who would not or could not go to Humperdinck on his own account." He watched Longstreet's face carefully, but saw no flash of wariness or satisfaction at the word "his." Good, so it was not a woman; he had thought it might be a wife or mistress, which would likely be no concern of his.

Longstreet had taken away the handkerchief from his face, and was watching Grey through narrowed eyes, plainly trying to think how much Dr. Humperdinck might have told him.

"A doctor's patients are entitled to confidentiality," he said slowly. "I am sure that Dr. Humperdinck would not reveal—"

"Dr. Humperdinck still experiences some effects of the apoplexy he suffered that night," Grey put in quickly. "Most of his memories have returned, but he is not entirely himself. Alas."

He smiled faintly, hoping that he left the impression that Humperdinck's judgment and sense of professional ethics had suffered impairment. He regretted impugning the doctor's reputation, even by implication—but reason was a ruthless master, and reason told him there was something here.

Longstreet pursed his lips, frowning thoughtfully, but no longer at Grey. He was looking at something inside his own head, and appeared to be questioning it. Absently, he reached to the table, where an aged meerschaum pipe lay beside a humidor.

"The worst of it is that I cannot smoke anymore," he remarked, running a thumb lovingly over the bowl, elegantly carved in the shape of a mermaid. Her pert breasts glowed golden, stroked for years. "A pipe is good for thinking."

"I must try it sometime," Grey said dryly. "The person for whom you desired Dr. Humperdinck's consultation—"

"Is dead." The words came down like an ax, severing conversation. Neither man spoke for nearly a minute; Grey heard the faint half-hour chime of his watch in its pocket, but was content to wait.

Something had been loosed; he felt it, like the sense of a mouse creeping round the corners of a room, but had no notion what it might be. Longstreet's eyes were fixed on his pipe, his mouth pressed tight. He was making up his mind, Grey saw, and to speak too soon or to say the wrong thing might startle the mouse back into its hole. He waited, the sound of Longstreet's wheezing breath just audible above the sound of the fire.

"My cousin," the doctor said at last. He raised his head and met Grey's eyes. "George." He spoke the name with a sense of affection, and regret.

"My condolences," Grey said quietly. "I had not heard that Lord Creemore had died."

"Last week." Longstreet rested the pipe upon his knee. "Le Roi est mort; vive Le Roi."

"I beg your pardon?"

Longstreet smiled, irony uppermost.

"I am my cousin's heir. I am Lord Creemore now—for what good it may do me. Wha—wha—" He cleared his throat and drew a rattling breath, then coughed explosively, and shook his head.

"What do you think is more important, Lord John?" he said, more clearly. "The life of a man, or the honor of his name when he is dead?"

Grey considered that. The question took him by surprise, but it had been meant seriously.

"For myself," he said at last, "I should say firstly, that it depends upon the man. And secondly, that a man whose life lacks honor surely has no claim upon it after death."

"Ah. But I did not say the *man's* honor, necessarily. I said, 'the honor of his name.' That, I expect, strikes you more cogently?"

"His family's honor, you mean." Yes, that blow struck home—as it was meant to. He kept his temper, though. "I would value that, yes. But honor is not only what the world perceives it to be, sir—but what it is. And I repeat that a man cannot be separated from his honor."

"No," Longstreet said thoughtfully. "I suppose that is true." *And yet* ... his face said, as plainly as words. Some disagreement struggled within him, and Grey suddenly thought that he might know its nature.

"But of course," he said, "you are a physician. From your point of view, perhaps, to preserve life must be the greatest good, regardless of other considerations?"

Longstreet—Grey could not yet think of him as Lord Creemore—shot him a startled glance, but whether because Grey's shot had struck in the gold, or because it had missed the target entire, he couldn't tell.

The appearance of the housekeeper with tea gave them both a moment to regroup. The little house was damp, and there was a chill in the air despite the fire; Grey's left arm ached where it had been broken, and he was glad of the hot china in his hands and the smell of good Assam. Beyond the physical comfort of tea, the small rituals employed in drinking it eased the atmosphere between them by degrees.

"You were your cousin's physician, then?" Grey asked, as casually as he might have asked the doctor to pass the sugar bowl.

Longstreet had recovered his composure, and the heat of the tea lent a slight warmth to his gaunt cheeks. He nodded.

"Yes. And he did not die of the syphilis, nor of any other disgraceful

disease, lest you be thinking that the point of my original question."

Dementia and insanity were quite as disgraceful as—if not more so than—a venereal disease, but Grey did not—yet—mention that. Most medical men of his acquaintance had no delicacy of feeling whatever, and Longstreet was an army surgeon—or had been—and was thus presumably hardened to the realities of even the most disgusting physical phenomena.

"What did he die of?" Grey asked bluntly.

"Dropsy," Longstreet replied, with no hesitation whatever. Either it was the truth or he had had his answer prepared ahead of time. Grey thought it was likely the truth.

"Your cousin died childless, if you are his heir," he observed. "Is there much family, besides yourself?"

Longstreet shook his head, his eyes hooded against the steam from his cup.

"Only myself now," he said quietly. "The title dies with me."

Grey didn't argue that Longstreet might still marry and have sons; he was no physician, but had seen his share of death. His own brush with it had perhaps made him morbidly sensitive to its presence; he could hear the sigh of Longstreet's damaged lungs, and see the blue shadow on his lips.

"So," Grey said slowly, "if it is the honor of your family name that concerns you ..."

The doctor's lips twisted in a wry expression, not quite a smile.

"You think that if the name ceases, there is no need to guard its honor?"

"Will you guard it at the price of your own?" The words came unbidden, surprising Grey nearly as much as Longstreet.

The doctor's mouth opened, working soundlessly. Then he picked up his tea and drank, hastily, as though to drown the words rising in his throat. His hands were shaking when he set the cup down; Grey heard the faint rattle of the china in its saucer.

"No," Longstreet said hoarsely, and stopped to clear his throat. "No," he said more firmly. "No, I won't. I cannot say what chance inspired Humperdinck to tell you, or how much he told you ..." He shot Grey a sharp glance, but Grey wisely preserved silence.

Very likely, Humperdinck had known nothing, as he had no chance of speaking with Longstreet before the apoplexy struck him down. Only that there was something to know. But Longstreet might have told him something when making the original appointment; best if he thought Grey knew whatever there was to know.

"My cousin was a Jacobite," Longstreet said abruptly.

Grey raised one brow, though his heart began to beat faster. "Many people have been, and are. Unless you mean—"

"You know what I mean." The wheezing note was still in Longstreet's voice, but the voice itself had grown stronger, and the doctor's gaze was steady. He had made up his mind.

The story, in its essence, was much as had been given out at the time of the Duke of Pardloe's death—save, of course, that the nobleman who was the centerpiece of the English plot to assassinate the king was not the Duke of Pardloe but the Earl of Creemore.

"And you learned of this ... when?"

"At the time." Longstreet looked down, fingers restless on the mermaid's scaly tail. "I ... was invited to join them. I declined."

"Not very safe," Grey observed skeptically. "For them or you."

"Only my cousin knew. It was he who invited me; tried to persuade me of the—the *rightness* of their cause. He did believe that," he added softly, still looking down as though his argument were addressed to the little mermaid. "That James Stuart was rightfully king."

"So his motives were quite without self-interest, were they?"

Longstreet looked up at that, eyes fierce.

"Are any man's?"

Grey shrugged, conceding the point. Longstreet in turn conceded another.

"Whatever George's motives, those of his fellow conspirators were most assuredly mixed. I didn't know them all—George wouldn't tell me their names until I became one of them. Reasonably enough." He paused to cough a little.

"You didn't know them all—but you knew some?"

Longstreet nodded slowly, clearing his throat.

"The Marquis of Banbury. Catholic—his whole family was ferociously Catholic. When—when your father was killed, he fled to France. Died there a few years ago. Another man—I never knew his name; George only called him *A*."

A for Arbuthnot? Grey wondered, with a dropping of the stomach.

"You knew this—but you said nothing?"

Longstreet leaned back a little in his chair, surveying Grey, and after a moment, shook his head.

"I asked you—did you value life more, or honor? I asked myself that. Many times. And at the time ... I chose my cousin's life above my honor. Your father was already dead; I could not alter that. I should have denounced Creemore, I know. But I could not bring myself to do it."

"After all," Grey said, curling his fingers under the edge of his seat in order not to strike Longstreet, "what harm could it do, to let my father's honor be destroyed and his family live in the belief that he had killed himself?"

He hadn't tried to keep his feelings out of his voice, and Longstreet recoiled a little, and turned his eyes away.

"I chose my cousin's life," he said again, so softly that the words were barely audible. Then his head rose and his gaze turned sharply on Grey.

"What do you mean—the belief that he had killed himself? He did kill himself. Did-didn't he?" For the first time, a note of uncertainty had entered the doctor's voice.

"No, he bloody didn't," Grey said. "He was murdered, and I intend to find out by whom."

Longstreet's brow narrowed in concentration, and he stared deeply into Grey's eyes, as though making a diagnosis of some kind. He blinked once or twice, then stood abruptly, and without a word, left the room, leaning on his stick.

Grey sat, nonplussed, wondering whether to follow. But the man had not seemed ill, or particularly offended. He waited, wandering slowly round the room, examining the doctor's collection of curiosities.

Within a few moments, he heard the sound of the doctor's stick, and turned from the mantelpiece to see Longstreet enter the room, a familiar book in his hand. Bound in rough leather, its cover darkened and shiny in spots from much handling.

The doctor held it out to Grey, breathing heavily, and Grey snatched it from his hand, his heart in his throat.

"I thought ... you might ... want that." Longstreet nodded at the book.

"I ... yes." Grey glanced at him, though he could scarcely take his eyes from the book. "Where did you get this?"

Longstreet had sat down, his face tinged with blue, and was breathing so heavily that he could manage no more than a helpless gesture.

Grey stood up and rummaged in his coat for his flask, from which he poured a substantial amount of brandy into the dregs of Longstreet's tea. He held the cup to Longstreet's thin blue lips, seeing in memory the doctor's hands performing a similar office for the stricken Humperdinck, that snowy night at White's Club.

It took some time before Longstreet was able to reply, but finally he managed, "It was among my cousin's things. I brought it away with me after he died."

"But you knew he had it?" The journal page had been left in Hal's office before Lord Creemore's death—but from the sound of things, it seemed unlikely that the gout-crippled and dropsical Lord Creemore had crept unobserved into the regimental offices. Whereas Longstreet, in his uniform, would have passed easily without notice.

Longstreet nodded.

"He ... showed it to me. When I pressed him. That is how I knew where to find it."

"You've read it?" The rough leather of the cover seemed to burn against Grey's fingers, and the impulse to open the book, see his father's writing spring to life, was nearly overwhelming.

The man's breath was coming more easily now.

"I've read it."

"Did he—my father—did he write anything regarding a Jacobite conspiracy?"

Longstreet nodded, taking another sip from his cup.

"Yes. He knew a bit, suspected a great deal more—but he was circumspect enough to refer to the principals in code. He called my cousin Banquo." One side of the doctor's mouth turned up. "There were three others referred to by name—Macbeth, Fleance, and Siward. I think Siward was a man named Arbuthnot—Victor Arbuthnot. I don't know the others."

Grey felt the blood pulse in his fingertips, where they touched the journal.

"I said that I was obliged to choose between the truth and my cousin's life—and I chose George, for good or ill. That choice, however, did not absolve me of further responsibility in the matter. I have no interest in politics—one charlatan on the throne is as good as another, and if the Pope meddles, so does Friedrich of Prussia."

His hand curled protectively around the little mermaid, and he glanced at Grey, his voice growing softer.

"But I did feel a responsibility to prevent further harm being done, if I could. If any one of those men had become convinced that your mother knew what your father knew, they might easily have killed her, rather than risk the possibility that she might expose them."

His mother must have feared precisely that eventuality—as well as the certainty that Hal would take matters into his own hands, if he discovered the truth. And so she had taken what precautions she could: disguising his father's murder as suicide, sending her younger son to safety in Aberdeen, and leaving the country herself. And then had remained quiet for the next seventeen years—watching.

"Does she know?" Longstreet asked curiously. "Who killed your father?"

"No. Had she known which man it was, she would have killed *him,* I assure you," Grey said.

Longstreet looked startled at that.

"They do say women are amazing vindictive," the doctor said reflectively.

"If you think she would keep silence, sir, you know nothing of women in general, or my mother in particular. But since she did not in fact know who the murderer was, she did keep silent. But then, that is why ..." The words died in his throat, revelation dawning.

"That's why you sent a page of this"—he lifted the journal—"to my brother, and another to my mother? Because of her impending marriage to General Stanley?"

Longstreet shook his head, the breath in his lungs sighing like wind in river willows.

"No—because my cousin was dying. It was clear to me that he was near death; almost beyond the reach ... of law or man. The others ... if they ..."

Grey was losing patience.

"And why did you set the O'Higginses on me?"

Longstreet frowned.

"Who?"

"Two soldiers who attempted to waylay me in Hyde Park." It occurred to him that Longstreet certainly knew the name of Percy's patron, Mr. A. The temptation to ask was enormous—but if he knew, the temptation to find the man would be greater still. And then what?

Longstreet had been struggling with his breath, as Grey struggled with his baser instincts.

"That—I did not intend that you should be h-harmed."

"I wasn't," Grey said shortly. "Not on that occasion. But then I was attacked in an alley near Seven Dials; was that you, too?"

Longstreet nodded, a hand pressed to his chest.

"A warning. They—both times, they were meant only to knock you senseless, and to leave a th-third page of the journal in your pocket. I had not expected you to f-fight back."

"Sorry about that." Grey rubbed his left arm. He had left off the sling, and it was beginning to throb. "What the devil was the point of this—this charade?"

Longstreet leaned back in his chair, sighing deeply.

"Justice," he said softly. "Call it a sop to my conscience. I chose my cousin, as I said. But it became clear to me some months ago that he was dying. Once he was beyond the reach of the law ... I could tell the truth. But I dared not do it openly—not then." A brief smile flitted across his face. "I had something to lose, then."

He had read the journal carefully, and selected three pages, all of them mentioning the name of Victor Arbuthnot.

"That was the only thing those pages had in common." To leave a page in Melton's office would arouse alarm; another sent to the countess would increase it; to leave the third with Grey, following a physical attack, would, he thought, insure that the pages were carefully studied—Arbuthnot's name would spring out of the comparison, and the Greys would go looking for him. And so far past the event, Arbuthnot would likely admit to the truth himself. If he did not ... Longstreet would still have the option of revealing the truth in some other way.

"That actually worked," Grey admitted, though his displeasure over the stratagem had not abated in the slightest. "But Arbuthnot didn't know my father had been murdered, either."

What matters more? Longstreet had asked him. The life of a man, or the honor of his name when he is dead? Both, Grey thought. Longstreet had chosen; Grey had no choice.

"Who in bloody *hell* killed my father?" he demanded in frustration. Longstreet closed his eyes.

"I don't know." The doctor had been growing visibly more exhausted as he spoke, needing to pause for breath at shorter intervals, coughing in short, harsh bursts that made Grey's own chest ache in sympathy. He flapped a limp hand toward the journal.

"You know ... what I know."

Grey sat for a moment, trying not to burst with the force of the questions that boiled in his brain. But Longstreet did not have the answers to most of them, and the one thing he did know—the name of Mr. *A*—Grey could not bring himself to ask.

He rose, clutching the journal, and one final question came to mind that Longstreet might be able to answer.

"My brother challenged Nathaniel Twelvetrees to a duel," he said abruptly. "Do you know why?"

Longstreet opened his eyes and looked up, faintly surprised.

"Don't you? Ah, I see not. I suppose Melton wouldn't refer to the matter. Twelvetrees had ... seduced his wife."

Grey felt as though Longstreet had suddenly punched him violently in the chest.

"His wife." It came to him, with a sense of mingled horror and relief, that Longstreet did not mean Minnie, but Esmé, his brother's first wife—who had been French and beautiful. She died in childbirth—and the child with her. Had the child been Hal's? he wondered, appalled. He remembered Hal's tearing grief at her death, but had not understood the half of his brother's feelings. His own heart burned at the thought.

"Thank you," he said, for lack of anything else to say to Longstreet, and turned to go. One final thought occurred to him.

"One last thing," he said, turning back, curious. "Would you have killed me? Had my brother not been there when you removed the shrapnel from my chest?"

Longstreet put back his head and surveyed Grey carefully, his eyes alive with ironic intelligence, still bright in his drawn face. Slowly, he shook his head.

"Had I met you in a dark alley, perhaps. H-had we met in a duel, certainly." He paused to breathe. "But you came ... to me as a patient." He coughed again, and tapped his chest.

"Do no ... harm," he wheezed, and closed his eyes.

The housekeeper, who had been standing silently in the shadows of the hall, came in, not looking at Grey. She went to Longstreet, knelt beside him, and smoothed the hair from his face, her touch tender. Longstreet did not open his eyes, but put up a hand, slowly, and laid it over hers.

Grey had dismissed the coach, not knowing how long his interview might take. It would be easy enough to find a cab, but he chose to walk, scarcely knowing which path he took.

His mind was a stew of revelation, shock, conjecture—and frustration. Beneath it all was a substratum of grief—for his father, for his mother, for Hal. His own grief seemed inconsequent, and yet magnified by all he now knew of his family's past.

The pressure in his chest made it painful to breathe, but he didn't worry about the remaining shrapnel; only stopped now and then when his breath grew too short to continue. At length, he found himself on the shore of the Thames, where he found an overturned dory and sat on it, the journal tucked under his coat, watching the brown water swirl past, lapping up the shore as the tide came in. He let his thoughts go, exhausted, and his mind emptied, little by little.

Spatters of rain passed over him, but toward sunset, the clouds overhead began to thin and drift apart.

A conclusion is simply the point at which you give up thinking. He gave up, and as he rose stiffly to his feet, found that a conclusion had indeed formed itself in his mind, much as a pearl forms inside an oyster.

He had been confessor to Longstreet. It was time he sought his own.

Chapter 32



The Path of Honor

"I did as you asked, Lord John," Dunsany said, his voice lowered, as though someone might overhear—though they were quite alone in the library.

"As I—oh!" Grey recollected, belatedly, his request that James Fraser might be afforded the opportunity to write letters. "I thank you, sir. Was there ... any result from the experiment, do you know?"

Dunsany nodded, his narrow brow furrowed in concern.

"He did send a number of letters—ten in all, I believe. As you specified, I did not open them"—his expression indicated that he thought this a grave mistake—"but I did take note of the directions upon them. Three were sent to a place in the Highlands, to a Mrs. Murray, two to Rome, and the remainder to France. I kept a list of the names...." He fumbled with the drawer of his desk, but Grey stopped him with a gesture.

"I thank you, sir. Perhaps later. Did he receive any reply to these missives?"

"Yes, several." Dunsany seemed expectant, but Grey only nodded, without asking for details.

The question of hidden Jacobites, which had once seemed so vital, was eclipsed. What had his mother said? *Let the past bury its dead.* It had to, he supposed; the present was all he could deal with.

He went on conversing with Dunsany, expressing interest in the affairs of Helwater, and later, listening to the county gossip of Lady Dunsany and Isobel, but without actually noticing any of it. He did see that relations seemed to have healed between Lord and Lady Dunsany; they sat close together at teatime, and their hands touched now and then over the bread and butter.

"How does your grandson fare?" Grey inquired at one point, hearing wailing overhead.

"Oh, wonderfully well," Lord Dunsany assured him, beaming.

"He's teething, poor lad," Lady Dunsany said, though not seeming distressed at her grandson's pain. "He's such a comfort to us."

"He has *six* teeth, Lord John!" Isobel told him, with the manner of one imparting vital and exciting intelligence.

"Indeed?" he said politely. "I am staggered."

He thought the meal would never end, but it did, and he was at last allowed to escape to his room. He did not stop there, though, but went quietly down the back stair and out. To the stable.



One of the other grooms was working in the paddock, but Grey sent him away with a brief sign. He didn't care whether anyone thought his desire to speak to Jamie Fraser in private was peculiar—and the other grooms were accustomed to it, in any case.

Fraser was pitching hay into the mangers, and barely glanced at Grey when he entered the stable.

"I shall be finished in a moment," he said. "Ye wish to hear about the letters, I suppose."

"No," Grey said. "Not that. Not now, in any case."

Fraser glanced sharply at him, but at Grey's motion to continue, shrugged and went on with his task, returning when all the mangers were filled.

"Will you speak with me, as man to man?" Grey asked, without preamble.

Fraser looked startled, but considered for a moment, and nodded.

"I will," he said warily, and it occurred to Grey that he thought Grey had come to speak of Geneva.

"It is a matter of my own affairs," Grey said, "not yours."

"Indeed." Fraser was still guarded, but the wariness in his eyes relaxed. "What affairs are these, sir? And why me?"

"Why you." Grey sighed, and sitting down on a stool, indicated that Fraser should do the same. "Because, Mr. Fraser, you are an honest man, and I trust that you will give me an honest opinion. And because, God damn it, you are the only person in this world to whom I can speak frankly."

Fraser's look of wariness returned, but he sat down, leaned his pitchfork against the wall, and said only, "Speak, then."

He had rehearsed the words a hundred times on the journey from London, rendering the tale as succinctly as possible. No need for details, and he gave none. No doorknobs.

"And that is my dilemma," he ended. "I am the only witness. Without my testimony, he will not be convicted, nor condemned. If I

lie before the court-martial, that is the end of my own honor. If I do not—it will be the end of his life or freedom."

To speak so openly was an overwhelming relief, and Grey remembered, with a pang, that the same feeling had come to him when he told Percy the story of his father's death. To talk in this way did more good than hours of thinking; laying out the pieces of the matter for Fraser made the choice clear in his own mind.

Fraser had listened closely throughout this recital, ruddy brows drawn in a slight frown. Now he looked at the ground, still frowning.

"This man is your brother, your kin," he said finally. "But kin by law, not blood. Have ye feeling for him, beyond the obligation of kin? Kindness? Love?" There was no marked emphasis on the last word; Grey thought Fraser meant only the love that existed within family.

Grey rose from his seat and strode restlessly up and down.

"Not love," he said finally. "And not kindness." There was some of both left, yes, but in the end neither of these would compel him sufficiently.

"Will it be honor, then?" Fraser said quietly. He stood up, silhouetted by the lantern light.

"Yes," Grey said. "But what is the path of honor, here?"

Fraser shrugged slightly, and Grey saw the glint of his red hair, caught by a stray beam of light that struck down from a chink in the boards of the loft overhead.

"What is honor for me may not be honor for you, Major," he said. "For me—for us—our honor *is* our family. I could not see a close kinsman condemned, no matter his crime. Mind," he added, lifting one brow, "infamous crime would be dealt with. But by the man's chief, by his own kin—not by a court."

Grey stood still, and let the jumbled pieces fall.

"I see," he said slowly, and did. Grey understood now what Fraser meant by honor. In the end, it was simple, and the relief of reaching the decision overwhelmed his realization of the difficulties still to be faced.

"It is honor—but not the honor of my reputation. The end of it," Grey said slowly, seeing it at last, "is that I cannot in honor see him hanged for a crime whose guilt I share—and from whose consequences I am escaped by chance alone."

Fraser stiffened slightly. "A crime whose guilt ye share." His voice was careful, realization—and distaste—clear in the words. He stopped, clearly not wishing to say more, but he could scarcely leave

the matter there.

"This man. He is not only your stepbrother, but ... your ..." He groped for a word. "Your catamite?"

"He was my lover, yes." The words should have been tinged with bitterness, but were not. Sadness, yes, but most of all, relief at the admission.

Fraser made a brief sound of contempt, though, and Grey turned upon him, reckless.

"You do not believe that men can love one another?"

"No," Fraser said bluntly. "I do not." His mouth compressed for an instant, and then he added, as though honesty compelled him, "Not in that fashion, at least. The love of brothers, of kin—aye, of course. Or of soldiers. We have—spoken of that."

"Sparta? Yes." Grey smiled without humor. They had fought the battle of Thermopylae one night, in his quarters at Ardsmuir Prison, using salt cellars, dice, and cuff buttons on a map scrawled with charcoal on the top of his desk. It had been one of their evenings of friendship.

"The love of Leonidas for his men, they for each other as warriors. Aye, that's real enough. But to—to ... use a man in such fashion ..." He made a gesture of repudiation.

"Think so, do you?" Grey's blood was already high; he felt it hot in his chest. "You've read Plato, I know. And scholar that you are, I would suppose that you've heard of the Sacred Band of Thebes. Perhaps?"

Fraser's face went tight, and in spite of the dim light, Grey saw the color rise in him, as well.

"I have," he said shortly.

"Lovers," Grey said, realizing suddenly that he was gloriously angry. "All soldiers. All lovers. Each man and his beloved. Who would desert his beloved, or fail him in the hour of danger?" He gave Fraser stare for stare. "And what do you say to that, Mr. Fraser?"

The Scot's eyes had gone quite black.

"What I would say," he said, counting out the words like coins, "is that only men who lack the ability to possess a woman—or cowards who fear them—must resort to such feeble indecencies to relieve their lust. And to hear ye speak of honor in the same breath ... Since ye ask, it curdles my wame. And what, my lord, d'ye say to *that*?"

"I say that I do not speak of the indecencies of lust—and if you wish to speak of such things, allow me to note that I have seen much

grosser indecencies inflicted upon women by men, and so have you. We have both fought with armies. I said 'love.' And what do you think love is, then, that it is reserved only to men who are drawn to women?"

The color stood out in patches across Fraser's cheekbones.

"I have loved my wife beyond life itself, and know that love for a gift of God. Ye dare to say to me that the feelings of a—a—pervert who cannot deal with women as a man, but minces about and preys upon helpless boys—that this is *love*?"

"You accuse me of preying upon *boys*?" Grey's fingers curled, just short of his dagger hilt. "I tell you, sir, were you armed, you would answer for that, here and now!"

Fraser inhaled through his nose, seeming to swell with it. "Draw on me and be damned," he said contemptuously. "Armed or no, ye canna master me."

"You think not? I tell you," Grey said, and fought so hard to control the fury in his voice that it emerged as no more than a whisper, "I tell you, sir—were I to take you to my bed—I could make you scream. And by God, I would do it."

Later, he would try to recall what had happened then. Had he moved, reflex and training cutting through the fog of rage that blinded him? Or had Fraser moved, some shred of reason altering his aim in the same split second in which he swung his fist?

Hard as he tried, no answer came. He remembered nothing but the shock of impact as Fraser's fist struck the boards an inch from his head, and the sob of breath, hot on his face. There had been a sense of presence, of a body close to his, and the impression of some irresistible doom.

Then he was outside, gulping air as though he were drowning, staggering blind in the glare of the setting sun. He had no balance, no bearings; stumbled and put out a hand for anchor, grasped some piece of farm equipment.

His vision cleared, eyes watering—but he saw neither the paddock, the wagon whose wheel he grasped, nor the house and lawns beyond. What he saw was Fraser's face. When he had said that—what demon had given him that thought, those words? *I could make you scream*.

Oh, Christ, oh, Christ. Someone had.

A feeling welled up in him like the bursting of blood vessels deep within his belly. Liquid and terrible, it filled him within moments, swelling far beyond his power to contain it. He must vomit, or—

He ripped at his flies, gasping. A moment, two, of desperate fisting, and it all came out of him. Remorse and longing, rage and lust—and other things that he could put no name to under torture—all of it ran like quicksilver down his spine, between his legs, and erupted in gouts that drained him like a punctured wine sack.

His legs had no strength. He sank to his knees and knelt there, swaying, eyes closed. He knew nothing but the sense of a terrible relief.

In minutes—or hours—he became aware of the sun, a dark red blur in the blackness of his closed lids. A moment later, he realized that he was kneeling in the puddled dirt of the yard, forehead pressed to a wagon wheel, his breeches loose and his member still tightly clutched in his hand.

"Oh, Christ," he said, very softly, to himself.

The door to the barn stood still ajar behind him, but there was no sound from the darkness within.



He would have left at once, save for the demands of courtesy. He sat through a final supper with the Dunsanys, replying automatically to their conversation without hearing a word, and went up afterward to tell Tom to pack.

Tom had already begun to do so, delicately alert to his employer's mood. He looked up from his folding when Grey opened the door, his face showing an alarm so pronounced that it penetrated the sense of numb isolation Grey had felt since the events of the afternoon.

"What is it, Tom?"

"Ah ... it's nothing, me lord. Only I thought mebbe you were him again."

"Him?"

"That big Scotchman, the groom they call Alex. He was just here." Tom swallowed, manfully suppressing the remnants of what had plainly been a considerable shock.

"What, *here*?" A groom would never enter the house proper, unless summoned by Lord Dunsany to answer some serious charge of misconduct. Still less, Fraser; the household were terrified of him, and he had orders never to set foot further than the kitchen in which he took his meals.

"Yes, me lord. Only a few minutes ago. I didn't even hear the door open. Just looked up from me work and there he was. Didn't half give me a turn!"

"I daresay. What the devil did he say he wanted?" His only supposition was that Fraser had decided to kill him after all, and had come upon that errand. He wasn't sure he cared.

The Scotchman had said nothing, according to Tom. Merely appeared out of nowhere, stalked past him like a ghost, laid a bit of paper on the desk, and stalked out again, silent as he'd come.

"Just there, me lord." Tom nodded at the desk, swallowing again. "I didn't like to touch it."

There was indeed a crumpled paper on the desk, a rough square torn from some larger sheet. Grey picked it up gingerly, as though it might explode.

It was a grubby bit of paper, translucent with oil in spots and pungent, clearly used originally to wrap fish. What had he used for ink, Grey wondered, and brushed a ginger thumb across the paper. The black smudged at once, and came off on his skin. Candleblack, mixed with water.

It was unsigned, and curt.

I believe your lordship to be in pursuit of a wild goose.

"Well, thank you very much for your opinion, Mr. Fraser!" he muttered, and crumpling the paper into a ball, crammed it in his pocket. "Can you be ready to leave in the morning, Tom?"

"Oh, I can be ready in a quarter hour, me lord!" Tom assured him fervently, and Grey smiled, despite himself.

"The morning will do, I think."

But he lay awake through the night, watching the early autumn moon rise above the stables, large and golden, growing small and pale as it rose among the stars, crossed over the house, and disappeared at last from view.



He had his answer, then—or one of them. Percy was not going to die, nor to live whatever remained of his life in prison, if Grey could prevent it. That much was decided. He was also decided that he himself could not lie before a court-martial. Not would not; could not. Therefore, he would find another way.

Precisely *how* he meant to accomplish this was not yet quite clear to him, but in the circumstances, he found his visit with Captain Bates at Newgate returning repeatedly to his mind—and in those memories, began to perceive the glimmerings of an idea. The fact that the idea was patently insane did not bother him particularly; he was a long way past worrying over such things as the state of his own mind.

While he considered the specifics of his emerging plan, though, he had another answer to deal with.

His first impulse, upon seeing Fraser's one-line note, had been to assume that this was mockery and dismissal. And, given the manner of their final meeting, was willing to accept it.

But that disastrous conversation could not be expunged from memory—not when it held the answer to his quandary regarding Percy. And whenever some echo of it came back to him, it bore with it Jamie Fraser's face. The anger—and the terrible nakedness of that last moment.

That note was not mockery. Fraser was more than capable of mocking him—did it routinely, in fact—but mockery could not disguise what he had seen in Fraser's face. Neither of them had wanted it, but neither could deny the honesty of what had passed between them.

He had fully expected that they would avoid each other entirely, allowing the memory of what had been said in the stable to fade, so that by the time he next returned to Helwater, it *might* be possible for them to speak civilly, both aware of but not acknowledging those moments of violent honesty. But Fraser hadn't avoided him—entirely. He quite understood why the man had chosen to leave a note, rather than speak to him; he himself couldn't have spoken to Fraser face to face, not so soon.

He had told Fraser that he valued his opinion as an honest man, and that was true. He knew no one more honest—often brutally so. Which drove him to the inescapable conclusion that Fraser had very likely given him what he asked for. He just didn't know what it bloody *meant*.

He couldn't return to Helwater; there was no time, even had he thought it would be productive. But he knew one other person who knew Jamie Fraser. And so he went to Boodle's for supper on a Thursday, knowing Harry Quarry would be there.

"I've found a ring, Harry," Grey said without preamble, sitting down beside Quarry in the smoking room where his friend was enjoying a postprandial cigar. "Like yours."

"What, this?" Quarry glanced at his hand; he wore only one ring, a Masonic emblem.

"That one," Grey said. "I found one like it; I'd meant to ask if you knew whose it was."

Quarry frowned; then his face cleared.

"Must be Symington's," he said, with the air of a magician pulling colored scarves from his sleeve. "He said he'd lost his—but that's months ago! D'you mean to say you've had it all this time?"

"I suppose so," Grey said apologetically. "I just found it in my pocket one day—must have picked it up accidentally."

He put his hand into his pocket and, leaning over, emptied the contents onto the small table between their chairs.

"You are the most complete magpie, Grey," Quarry said, poking gingerly through the detritus. "I wonder you don't build nests. But no, of course, it's Melton who does that. What's that, for God's sake, a pritchel?"

"Part of one. I believe you may throw that away, Mr. Stevens." Grey handed the broken bit of metal to the steward, who accepted it with the air of one handling a rare and precious object.

"What's this?" Harry had pulled out a smeared bit of paper, and was frowning at it, nose wrinkled. "Smells a bit."

"Oh, that. It—"

"I believe your lordship to be in pursuit of a wild goose," Quarry read. He paused for a moment, then looked up at Grey. "Where did you get this?"

"From one James Fraser, erstwhile Jacobite." Something in Quarry's face made Grey lean forward. "Does this actually mean something, Harry?"

Quarry blew out his cheeks a little, glancing round to see they were not overheard. Seeing this, Mr. Stevens retreated tactfully, leaving them alone.

"Fraser," Quarry said at last. "One James Fraser. Well, well." Quarry had preceded Grey as governor of Ardsmuir Prison, and knew Jamie Fraser well—well enough to have kept him in irons. Quarry smoothed the edge of the paper, thinking.

"I suppose you were too young," he said finally. "And it wasn't a term one heard much during the Rising in '45. But there was—still is, I suppose—a certain amount of support for the Stuarts in Ireland. And for what the observation is worth, the younger Irish nobles who

followed the Old Pretender—they called themselves 'wild geese.' "He glanced up, quizzical. "Are you by any chance in search of an Irish Jacobite, Grey?"

Grey blinked, taken aback.

"To tell you the truth, Harry, I haven't the slightest idea," he said. "Perhaps I am."

He plucked Symington's ring out of the mess and handed it to Quarry.

"Will you see Symington gets this back when he returns?"

"Certainly," Quarry said, frowning at him. "But why not give it to him yourself?"

"I don't know quite where I might be then, Harry. Perhaps in Ireland—chasing a wild goose." Grey shoveled the rest of his rubbish back into his pocket and smiled at Quarry. "Thank you, Harry. Enjoy your cigar."

Chapter 33



Leaving Party

The district near St. Giles was known as the Rookery, and for good reason. Rooks could not be half so filthy, nor so noisy, as the poor Irish of London; the narrow lanes rang with curses, shrieks, and church bells, and Tom Byrd drove with one hand on the reins and the other on the pistol in his belt.

As the horse clopped into Banbridge Street, Grey leaned down from the wagon, a shilling in his hand. The glint of the metal drew a ragged boy from a doorway as though he were magnetized.

"Your honor?" The boy couldn't decide where to stare—at the coin, at Grey, or at the contents of the wagon.

"Rafe and Mick O'Higgins," Grey said. "You know them?"

"Everybody does."

"Good. I've something that belongs to them. Can you take me to them?"

The boy's hand shot out for the coin, but he had decided where his attention properly lay; his gaze was rapt, riveted to the wagon.

"Aye, your honor. They'll be at Kitty O'Donnell's wake just now, I'd say. Near the end of O'Grady Street. But you'll not get by this way," he added, tearing his attention briefly from the wagon. "You'll need to back up and go round by Filley Lane, that's quickest."

"You'll take us?" Grey had another coin ready, but the boy was up on the seat beside him before he could offer it, neck craned round to look at the automaton.

Grey had paused just on the edge of St. Giles, and there removed both the discreet canvas that had covered the object on the drive through London, and also the upper cabinet, so the brilliantly colored figurine was now clearly visible, riding like an emperor in the bed of the wagon, its arms moving stiffly and its trunk rotating to the occasional whir of clockwork.

Tom Byrd, who had the reins, gave their guide a narrow look and muttered something under his breath, but clucked to the horse and guided the equipage carefully through the refuse-choked streets. Grey and the guide were both obliged to get down every so often and move some object—crushed barrels, a heap of spoilt cabbage, and on one

notable occasion, a recently deceased pig—out of the way, but the distance was not great, and within half an hour, they had reached their destination.

"In there?" Grey looked dubiously at the building, which gave every evidence of being about to collapse. Structural integrity quite aside, it looked like a place that no one concerned with his personal safety would enter. Soot black faces peeped from the alley, loungers on the street drew casually upright, hands in pockets, and the doorless entry yawned black and lightless as the doorway to hell.

Somewhere above, inside the house, a tin whistle played something whining and lugubrious.

Grey drew breath to ask whether the boy might go inside and fetch out the O'Higgins brothers, but the sound of a door opening came from somewhere inside, and a sudden draft whooshed out of the entrance, wafting a stench that caught in his throat and made him gag.

"Bloody hell!" Tom Byrd exclaimed. He snatched a kerchief from his sleeve and clapped it to his nose. "What's *that*?"

"Something dead," Grey said, trying not to breathe. "Or someone. And a long time dead, at that."

"Kitty O'Donnell," their guide said, matter-of-fact. "Told ye 'twas a wake, didn't I?"

"You did," Grey agreed, and groped in his purse, breathing shallowly through his mouth. "I believe it is customary to contribute something to the, er, refreshment of the attendees?"

To his surprise, the boy hesitated.

"Well, so it is, sir, to be sure. Only that ... well, d'ye see, it's old Ma O'Donnell."

"The dead woman?"

"No, her mother, it would be."

It was indeed the custom to offer gin at least to the mourners who came to wake the dead, the boy explained, and sure, it was kindly taken if the mourners then might subscribe a few pennies toward the burial. But Kitty O'Donnell had been popular, and so many folk came and such a fine time was had in the singing and telling of tales that the gin was all drunk and more sent for, and by the end of it, all the subscription money had been spent, and not a penny left for the shroud.

"So she did it again," the boy said, with a shrug.

"Did what—held another wake?"

"Aye, sir. Folk thought a great deal o' Kitty. And there were folk who'd not heard in time to come before, and so ..." He glanced reluctantly toward the open doorway. Someone had shut the inner door, and the stink had decreased, though it was still noticeable, even over the multifarious odors of the Rookery.

"How long's that corpse been a-lying there, then?" Tom demanded through his handkerchief.

"Best part of two weeks," the boy said. "She's taken up six subscriptions, Old Ma has; stayed drunk as a captain's parrot the whole time. The folk what live downstairs are fed to the back teeth see"—he nodded toward the windowless building—"but when they tried to complain, the mourners what hadn't had anything yet put them out. So Rose Behan—it's her what lives downstairs, with her six kids—she went to Rafe and Mick, to ask could they see about it. So I'm thinking, sir—not to discourage yer honor from a kindly thought—as might be ye should wait?"

"It might be that I should," Grey murmured. "How long—"

The inner door was flung open again with some violence—he heard the bang, and the miasma thickened, so dense a smell as to be nearly visible. There was a thumping noise, as some heavy body rolled downstairs, and the tin whistle ceased abruptly. Noises of argument and the trampling of feet, and a few moments later, an elderly man, much the worse for drink, emerged backward from the building, staggering and mumbling.

He clutched the ankles of a fat, blowzy woman, whom he was dragging, very slowly, over the threshold. The woman was either dead herself or simply dead drunk; it made little difference, so far as Grey could see. Her head bumped over the cobbles, matted gray hair straggling from her cap, and her tattered skirts were dragged up round her raddled thighs; the prospect so exposed was enough to make him avert his eyes, from respect for his own modesty, as much as hers.

This small procession was followed by one of the O'Higgins brothers, who poked his head out of the doorway, frowning.

"Now, then, Paulie, you take the auld bitch home to your wife, and see she don't come out again 'til poor Kitty's put away decent, will ye now?"

The old gent shook his head doubtfully, muttering toothlessly to himself, but continued his laborious progress, making his way down the lane, his companion's ample bottom scraping a wide furrow in the layers of dead leaves, dog turds, and bits of fireplace ash as they went. "Should someone not assist him?" Grey inquired, watching this. "She seems rather heavy."

"Ah, no, God save ye, sir," O'Higgins said, seeming to notice him for the first time. "She ain't heavy; she's his sister." The man's eye passed over the wagon and its content with elaborate casualness.

"And what might bring your honor to O'Grady Street, I wonder?" Grey coughed, and put away his handkerchief.

"I have a proposition, Mr. O'Higgins, that may be to our mutual advantage. If there is a slightly more salubrious place where we could talk?"



With Tom left sitting in the wagon, pistol at the ready, Grey followed the O'Higginses to a squalid ordinary, where the force of their presences promptly cleared a small back room. Grey was interested to note this; evidently his assessment of the O'Higginses' influence in St. Giles had not been mistaken.

He still could not tell one from the other with any certainty, but supposed it didn't matter. Rafe was the elder; he supposed the one who was doing most of the talking must be he. Both of them listened avidly, though, making no more than token objections to his proposition.

"Jack Flynn's leaving party?" Rafe—he supposed it was Rafe—said, and laughed. "Sure, and that will be the grand affair. Rumor has it that he left all his proceeds with his dolly, with orders to spend every farthing of it on drink."

"There will be a great many people there, then, you think?" Jack Flynn was a notorious highwayman, due to be hanged at Tyburn in two days' time. Like many well-known thieves, he was expected to have a large "leaving party" at Newgate, with dozens—sometimes hundreds—of friends and well-wishers flooding into the prison to bid him a proper farewell and see him in style to his execution.

"Oh, indeed," Mick—if it was Mick—agreed, nodding. "Be a tremenjous crowd; Flynn's well liked."

"Excellent. And there would be no difficulty in taking your automaton in, to provide entertainment at the party? Perhaps with a few companions to help carry it? One of whom might be visibly the worse for drink?"

Four Irish eyes sparkled with the thought. A fortune-telling automaton would be the greatest and most profitable attraction, particularly at a highwayman's send-off.

"Nothing easier, sir," they assured him with one voice.

Kitty O'Donnell's wake had in fact suggested a refinement to his original plan. To begin with, he had thought of using the automaton's cabinet, the clockwork removed and left behind in the prison. But if a body could be procured ...

"It will need to be fresh, mind, and of roughly a similar appearance," Grey said, a little dubiously. "But I don't want you to kill anyone," he added hastily.

"Not the slightest difficulty there, your honor," one of the O'Higginses assured him. "A quick word in the priest's ear, and we'll have what's needed. Father Jim knows every corpus what drops in the Rookery. And it's not as though we mean any disrespect to the corpus," he added piously. "It will get decent burial, won't it?"

"The best funeral money can buy," Grey assured him. It would be an Anglican funeral, but he supposed that would be all right. It was far from unusual for prisoners to be found dead in Newgate. And neither Newgate officials nor the military, he thought, would be eager to raise questions: the former not wishing to admit they had lost a prisoner, the latter only too glad to be rid of a troublesome nuisance before trial and scandal overtook them.

The O'Higginses exchanged glances, shrugged, and seemed satisfied, though Rafe did offer one last caution.

"Your honor does realize, don't ye, that a felon what escapes prison and is caught is promptly hanged, no matter what it was he was jugged for in the first place?"

"Yes, Mr. O'Higgins. As are those found to have conspired in his escape. *All* those found to have so conspired."

The guards would almost certainly realize the deception, but with a choice between raising a hue and cry, during which their own dereliction would become obvious, and quietly listing one Percival Wainwright as having died of gaol fever ... Hal wasn't a betting man, but Grey was, and a long way past reckoning the odds regarding this particular endeavor.

A gap-toothed grin split the Irishman's stubbled face.

"Oh, well, then, sir. So long as we're clear. Will your honor come along to see the fun?"

"I—" He stopped dead. He had not thought of the possibility. He could. Unshaven, dressed in filthy homespun, in the midst of a gang of Irish roisterers, he could pass into the prison undetected. Could be one of those who transferred the body into Percy's cell, saw him change clothes with the corpse. One of those who, arms about his warm and living body, carried Percy out in the same guise of drunkenness, and saw him laid in the coffin in which, disguised as a deceased relative of the O'Higgins brothers, he would be carried to Ireland and Susannah Tomlinson, while the nameless corpse was hastily buried.

For an instant, the desire to see Percy one more time, to touch him, blazed through his body like a liquid flame. He drew breath, and let the flame go out.

"Better not," he said, with real regret, and handed over a small fat purse. "Godspeed, Mr. O'Higgins."

Chapter 34



Duchess of Pardloe

After the private—but well-appointed—funeral of Percival [sic] Wainwright, Grey found himself at loose ends. Not yet healed enough to return to duty, but too healthy to be confined to bed, he found himself at once depressed and restless, unable to settle to anything. The family, sympathetic but relieved, left him largely to himself.

On the morning of October 13, he stood in the back garden of his brother's house, moodily flipping bits of bread into the fishpond, and trying to feel grateful that he was not standing before a court-martial.

He became belatedly aware that Tom Byrd was standing beside him, and had been there for some time.

"What?" he said, depressed spirits making him abrupt.

"It's some of them Irish, me lord," Tom said, his tone making it clear that he spoke for the household, and the house hold did not approve.

"Which Irish?"

"Tinkers, me lord. But they insist as how you know them?" The rising inflection of this statement suggested the gross improbability of its being the truth.

"Oh, his honor's well-acquainted with us, sure."

Tom jerked round at this, offended at discovering two ragged, unshaven presences just behind him, grinning.

"Tinkers, is it?" one of them said, nudging Tom Byrd with a familiar elbow as he passed. "And who died and made you Pope, boyo?"

"Mr. O'Higgins. And Mr. O'Higgins." Grey felt an unaccustomed and involuntary smile come to his face, despite his surprise. He had never expected to see them again.

"The same, your honor." One—Rafe?—bowed respectfully. "Begging your pardon, sir, for the slight overstayin' of our leave. We'd a few family matters of urgency to be settled. I'm sure your lordship's known the like."

Grey noticed that Mick—if that was Mick—had a heavily bandaged arm, the bandage fairly fresh but stained with blood.

"An accident?" he inquired. The O'Higginses exchanged looks.

"Dog bite," Mick said blandly, putting his injured hand in his

pocket. "But the anguish has passed, your honor. We come to report for duty, see, all fit."

Meaning, Grey supposed, that Ireland was at present too hot to hold them, and they proposed to take refuge in the army. Again.

"Have you indeed?" he asked dryly.

"Aye, sir. Having safely delivered your message to the lady—which she give us a missive to hand to you upon our return." The Irishman groped in his coat with his uninjured hand, but failed to find what he was looking for. "You got it, Rafe?"

"O' course not, clumsy. You had it."

"No, I never. Now I think, you had it last."

"God damn yer eyes for a bloody liar, I didn't!"

Grey rolled his own eyes briefly and nodded to Tom, who reached into his pocket and, with a long-suffering air, produced a handful of coins.

The letter being now miraculously discovered, the O'Higginses gracefully accepted a further generous reward for their service—with many disclaimers of reluctance and unworthiness—and were dismissed to report to Captain Wilmot at the barracks. Grey was sure Wilmot would be overjoyed at their reappearance.

He sent Tom to be sure the O'Higginses actually departed the house, unaccompanied by silverware or valuable small objects, and, alone, took out the letter.

It was addressed simply, *Major John Grey*, in an unfamiliar hand, without additional direction. Despite himself, his heart beat faster, and he could not have sworn on the Bible whether it was dread or hope that made it do so.

He slid a thumb under the flap, noting that it had been sealed but the seal was missing; only a reddish smear from the wax remained. Only to be expected—though he was certain that if pressed on the matter, the O'Higginses would claim virtuously that the letter had been given them in that condition.

There were several pages; the first held a brief note:

If you are reading this, Major, you have fulfilled both my requests, and you have my thanks. You do, I think, deserve something more, and here it is. Whether and how you make use of it is up to you; I shan't care anymore.

Michael Bates, Captain, Horse Guards

His first emotion was relief, mingled with disappointment. Relief, however, was uppermost, followed quickly by curiosity.

He turned to the next page. The name of Bernard Adams leapt out of the paper, and Grey sank slowly into his chair as he read.

I make this statement as a condemned man, knowing that I shall soon die, and speaking therefore the truth, as I swear upon my hope in God.

I first met with Mr. Adams at a party at Lord Joffrey's house, upon the 8th of April last year. Mr. and Mrs. T were also there, and Mrs. T spent some time in conversation with me alone. Upon her retiring for a moment, Adams came up to me and said without preamble that she was a handsome woman, but no doubt expensive. If I cared to hear of a way of making some money, I should call upon him at his home upon the Tuesday next.

My curiosity was roused, and so I did. Taking me into his private library, he shocked me by producing a sheaf of notes, signed by me in promise of payment of various gambling debts, some very large. He produced also certain correspondence, written to me by Mrs. T, and of a nature which made the relations between us more than clear. These would have ruined both of us, if made public.

I perceiving that Mr. Adams had me in an invidious position, I inquired what use he might have in mind to make of me.

The note then detailed Adams's enrollment of Captain Bates in a scheme involving the abstraction and transfer of a number of documents. The names of Ffoulkes, Otway, and Jeffords were mentioned; others were involved, Bates believed, but he did not know their names. Ffoulkes had been drawn into the conspiracy by the offer of money, Bates believed; Otway and Jeffords by the threat of exposure.

Bates had stolen various documents from several offices in Whitehall; he was well known there and his presence passed without remark. He had given these documents to Adams, who, he presumed, was collecting information from his other cat's-paws, as well.

The attack upon Adams was a sham; the plan had been for Bates to meet him privately by the river near Lambeth, where Adams would pass over a small chest containing all the documents.

A boat would be waiting. Bates would create the signs of a struggle, wound Adams slightly for the sake of conviction, and then go aboard the boat, which would carry him to France, where he would deliver these documents to Mrs. Ffoulkes's brother. The chest would contain not only the official documents but also the evidence of Bates's gambling debts, Mrs. Tomlinson's letters, and a sum of money. Once safely in France, he might destroy the former, send for Mrs. Tomlinson, and live in peace.

Adams had told me that Otway and Jeffords were to burgle his house for the look of the thing, then make themselves scarce, but that he would keep hold of the documents himself until they were given me. I learned later from Otway that Adams had men in hiding, who sprang upon him and Jeffords the moment they had entered the house. Meanwhile, he proceeded to our rendezvous, where other men of his employ were already waiting.

These emerged as soon as I had done my part of wounding Mr. Adams slightly, scratching his arm with a knife as agreed upon, and seized me.

I do not know what became of the documents themselves. Adams had with him a small chest, but this was knocked over in the struggle and proved to be empty. You will know what followed.

The statement ended abruptly.

This was signed by Captain Michael Bates, his signature witnessed by the governor of Newgate, and—a final touch of Bates's sardonic humor—one Ezekial Poundstone, hangman.

Grey folded the sheets carefully together. It was a brief, clear statement, but possessed of a sufficiency of detail—names, dates, places—and the nature of some of the documents Bates had removed at Adams's behest.

He stood looking into the pond for some time, quite unaware of where he was or what he was looking at.

Plainly, Adams's plan had been to have Bates, Otway, and Jeffords blamed for the theft. He could not have expected what had actually happened—that the theft would be hushed up, the conspirators condemned for unnatural vice rather than theft and treason—these being, of course, quite natural vices.

What had been Ffoulkes's part in the matter? Presumably, to

conduct the negotiations with France, using his wife's relatives as the go-between with Louis's spymasters. But when had Ffoulkes shot himself? It seemed so long ago, and Grey's memory of anything further back than yesterday was still undependable. He did recall one thing, though, and going hastily into the house entered the library and rummaged through the drawer into which he was inclined to decant miscellaneous papers, until he emerged with a smeared and wornedged broadsheet, the faint smell of coffee still in its creases.

He hastily unfolded Bates's statement to check a date. No, Ffoulkes had shot himself a few days before the arrest of Bates, Otway, and Jeffords.

The theft would have been discovered very shortly; Adams could not delay in executing the part of his crime designed to shield himself from blame. But what of the other part? The delivery of the stolen material to France? With Ffoulkes dead, that pathway might be closed.

He folded the letter again, and thrust it into his pocket. These were all questions that could wait. The important thing was that he now had a tool that might be used to open up Bernard Adams like a keg of salt herring. Someone in authority would need to see this letter—but not just yet.

"Nordman!" he called, going to the hallway. "Call the coach, please —I'm going out."



Bernard Adams's house was not grand, but it was elegant; an Inigo Jones jewel, set in its own small private wood. Grey was not of a mind to admire the scenery, but did observe a small stone building, a little way from the house, whose ornaments showed it clearly to have been originally a Catholic chapel. Adams was not Catholic, though—could not have held such positions in the government as he had, if he were.

Not openly Catholic.

"An Irish Jacobite," Grey murmured to himself, appalled. "Jesus." Positions in the government. Adams's rise to power had begun with his appointment as secretary to Robert Walpole—and Grey saw, as clearly as though the scene was taking place before him on the drive, the picture of the tall, ailing prime minister, leaning heavily on his secretary—his Irish secretary—coming down the path to visit the

widow of the late Duke of Pardloe.

Clenching his jaw so hard that his teeth creaked, he bounded up the steps and pounded on the door.

"Sir?" The butler was an Irishman; so much was obvious from the one word.

"Your master. I wish to see him."

"Ah. I'm sorry, sir, the master's gone out."

Grey seized the man by one shoulder and thrust him backward, stepping into the house.

"Sir!"

"Where is he?"

The butler glanced wildly round for assistance, and looked as though he was about to shout for help.

"Tell me where he is, and I'll go. Otherwise ... I shall be obliged to look for him." Grey had worn his sword; he put a hand on the hilt.

The butler gasped.

"He—he has gone to meet the Duchess of Pardloe."

"He—what?" Grey shook his head, convinced that he was hearing things, but the man repeated it, gaining confidence, as Grey seemed not about to run him through.

"The Duchess of Pardloe, sir. She sent a note this morning—I was there when the master opened it, and, ah ... happened to see."

Grey nodded, narrowly keeping a grip on himself.

"Did you happen to see where the meeting was? And when?"

"In the Edgeware Road, a house called 'Morning Glory,' four o'clock," the butler blurted.

Without a word, Grey let go of his sword and left. He felt dazed and off balance, as though someone had suddenly pulled a carpet out from under him.

It couldn't be—but it couldn't *not* be. No one but his mother would use that title. And to use it to Adams was a direct challenge. It must be her. But how had she got back to London, and what in God's *name* did she think she was doing?

Gripped by fear, he ran down the drive toward the street where he had left his carriage waiting. Morning Glory. He knew the house; it was a small, elegant house belonging to the Walpole family. What ...?

"Edgeware Road!" he shouted to the coachman, ducking inside. "And hurry!"



Morning Glory looked deserted. The shutters were closed, the fountain in the front court dry, the court itself unswept, carpeted with dead leaves. It had the look of a house whose family had gone away to the country, leaving the furniture under sheets, the servants paid off.

Neither was there any sign of a coach, a horse, or any living person. Grey mounted the stoop softly, and stood for a moment, listening. The place was still, save the cawing of rooks in the bare-limbed trees in the garden.

He took hold of the doorknob; it turned in his hand. Slowly letting out the breath he had been holding, he opened the door and stepped warily inside.

The furniture *was* under sheets, he saw. He paused, listening. No voices. No sound, save his own breathing. He knew the house, had been here now and then, at musicales—the present Earl of Orford's wife sang, or thought she could.

The doors off the foyer stood open—all but one. That one led, he thought, to the library. He put a hand on his sword hilt, but decided against drawing it. Adams was a slight man, and twenty years Grey's senior; he wouldn't need it.

He set his hand on the doorknob; it was white china, painted with roses, and a pang went through him at the cool slick touch of it on his hand, but there was no time now to think of such things. He eased the door gently open—and came face to face with the barrel of a pistol, pointed directly at him.

He flung himself to the side, seizing a chair, which he narrowly stopped himself from throwing at the person holding the gun.

"Jesus!" he said. He stood frozen for an instant, then, quivering in every limb, set the chair slowly down and collapsed onto it.

"What the devil are you doing here?" his mother demanded, lowering the pistol.

"I might ask you the same thing, madam." His heart was pounding in his chest, sending small jolts of pain down his left arm with every beat, and he had broken out in a cold sweat.

"It is a private affair," she said fiercely. "Will you bloody leave?" He paid no attention to her unaccustomed language.

"I will not. What were you intending? To shoot Mr. Adams on sight? Is that thing loaded?"

"Of course it is loaded," she said in exasperation, "and if I'd meant

to shoot him on sight, you'd be dead at the moment. Will you go away!"

"No," he said briefly, and rising, reached for the gun. "Give me that."

She took two steps back, holding the gun—which was not only loaded and primed, but cocked, he saw—protectively against her breast.

"John, I wish you to leave," she said, as calmly as she could, though he saw the pulse beat fast in the hollow of her throat, and the slight shaking of her hands. "You *must* go, and now. I will tell you everything, I swear it. But not *now*."

"He isn't coming." That much had dawned on him. It was nearly half past four—he had heard the bells strike, just before his arrival. If Adams had meant to come, he would be here. The fact that he was not ...

She stared at him, uncomprehending.

"Adams," he repeated. "It is Bernard Adams who killed Father?"

Her face drained of all color, and she sat down, quite suddenly, on a sofa. Her eyes closed, as though she could not keep them open.

"What have you done, John?" she whispered. "What do you know?"

He came and sat down beside her, removing the pistol from her hand, gone limp and unresisting.

"I know that Father was murdered," he said gently. "I've known since the morning you found him. I was there, hiding in the conservatory."

Her eyes sprang open in shock, the same light blue as his own. He laid his free hand over hers, squeezing gently.

"When did you come back?" he asked. "Does Sir George know?"

She shook her head blindly. "I—three days ago. I told him I wanted to be in London for the marriage of a friend. He will come back himself in a month; he made no objection."

"He will probably have objections, should he come back to find you dead or arrested."

He breathed, feeling his heart begin to slow.

"You should have told us," he said. "Hal and me."

"No." She shook her head, closing her eyes again. "No! He would never have let it rest. You know what Hal is like."

"Yes, I do," Grey said, smiling despite himself. "He's just like you, Mother. And me."

Trembling, she bent her head, and buried her face in her hands. A

constant fine tremor was running through her, like the shifting of sand beneath one's feet as the tide goes out, *terra firma* melting away.

"I have lost a husband," she said softly, to her feet. "I would not lose my sons." Lifting her head, she gave him a quick, desperate glance.

"Do you think I know nothing about men? About you and your brother in particular? Or about the general?"

"What do you mean?"

She made a small sound that might have been a laugh or a sob.

"Do you mean to tell me that I might have told you this—any of you—and expected you *not* to go straight out in pursuit of the matter, regardless of the threat?"

"Well, of course not." He stared at her in incomprehension. "What else could we do?"

She drew a trembling hand down her face, and turned to the wall, where an ornamental looking glass hung.

"Would it be better if I'd had daughters?" she asked the mirror, in apparent earnestness.

"No," she answered herself. "They'd only marry men, and there you are."

She closed her eyes for a moment, plainly collecting herself, then opened them and turned to him, composed.

"If I'd known who it was," she said firmly, "I would have told Hal. At least," she amended, "I would have told him once I'd decided how best to deal with the matter. But I didn't know. And for him—or later, you—to go charging into danger, with no clear notion where the danger lay, nor how widespread the threat might be? No. No, I wasn't having that."

"You may have a point," he admitted reluctantly, and she gave a small snort.

"But you did find out." It occurred to him, with a sense of awe, that she had never been reconciled to the duke's death—that she had been waiting, patiently watching, all this time, for an opportunity to discover and destroy the man who had killed him. "How did you discover Mr. Adams's name?"

"I blackmailed Gilbert Rigby."

Grey felt his mouth fall open, and swiftly closed it.

"What? How?"

The ghost of a smile crossed her lips.

"Captain Rigby—I suppose I must call him 'Dr. Rigby' now—

gambles. He always did, and I kept an eye upon him. I knew he had run through most of his family's fortune, when he sold the town house his father left him, last year. He's using some of the funds donated for the Foundling Hospital now. And so I asked Harry Quarry to make inquiries, very quietly—and to buy up his debts." She reached toward a leather case that lay on the table beside the sofa, and flipped open the cover, to show a sheaf of papers. "I showed him them, and told him I would expose him if he did not tell me who had killed Gerard."

What had he told Dr. Longstreet? Had she known which man it was, she would have killed him, I assure you.

Grey felt shock, but no particular surprise.

"And he did."

"I think it was a relief to him," she said, sounding faintly surprised. "Gilbert is not a bad man, you know—only weak. He could not bring himself to tell the truth at the time; that would have cost him everything. But he was sincerely appalled at what had happened—he said that he did not know for certain that Bernard Adams had killed Gerry, and had managed to keep his conscience dormant all this time by telling himself that Gerry must have committed self-murder. But faced with the truth—and with those—" she cast a sardonic eye toward the leather case, "he admitted it. He still has something to be lost, after all."

"And you don't?" Grey asked, piqued at the thought of her planning to face Adams by herself.

She eyed him, one brow raised.

"A great deal to lose," she said evenly. "But I am a gambler, too—and I have a great deal of patience."

He picked the pistol up, and carefully uncocked it.

"Did you calculate the odds of being caught?" he asked. "Even if you could prove that Adams killed Father—and Gilbert Rigby's admission is far from proof—you'd very likely be hanged for murder. And what would Sir George think of that?"

She looked surprised.

"What? What do you think I am?"

"You don't want me to answer that, Mother. What do you mean?"

"I mean I didn't intend to kill him," she said indignantly. "What good would that do? Beyond the minor gratification of revenge, what would I want with his miserable little life?" she added bitterly.

"No. I meant to make him confess the crime"—she nodded toward the table, and Grey saw that besides the leather case containing Rigby's debts, there was a portable writing desk, as well—"and then let him go. He could leave the country if he liked; he would be exposed, he would lose everything that mattered to him—and I could give Gerry back his honor."

Her voice trembled on the last word, and Grey brought her hand on impulse to his lips.

"I'll see it done," he whispered. "I swear it."

Tears were running down her face, but she took a deep breath and held her voice steady.

"Where is he? Adams?"

"Running, I think." He told her what Adams's butler had said. "As he hasn't come, he probably supposes that you *do* have proof. And there's this—" He fumbled in his pocket, turning out the usual assortment of trifles, among which was Captain Bates's postmortem denunciation.

She read it in silence, then turned back to the first page and read it again.

"So he's gone," she said flatly, laying the papers on her knee. "Taken the money and fled to France. I frightened him, and he's gone."

"He hasn't left the country yet," Grey said, trying to sound encouraging. "And even if he should escape—plainly he *has* lost his position, his reputation. And you did say you don't want his life."

"I don't," she said, between clenched teeth. "But this"—she smacked the papers with the back of her hand, sending them to the floor—"is useless to me. I don't care that the world knows Bernard Adams for a criminal and traitor—I want him to be known as my husband's murderer; I want your father's honor back!"

Grey bent to pick up the papers from the floor, and rising, tucked them back into his pocket.

"All right," he said, and took a deep breath. "I'll find him."

He hesitated for a moment, looking at his mother. She sat upright, straight as a musket barrel—but she looked very small, and suddenly her age showed in her face.

"Will I see you ... home?" he asked, not sure where her home might be. The house in Jermyn Street had been closed; should he take her to Minnie's house? His heart sank at thought of the hubbub *that* would cause.

"No," she said, obviously having thought the same thing. "I have a carriage; I'll go to the general's house. You go."

"Yes." But he didn't go, not at once. Thoughts, fears, suppositions, half-baked plans were whirling through his head. "If you should need ... help ... if I am not nearby—"

"I'll call on Harry Quarry," his mother said firmly. "Go, John."

"Yes. Yes, that—" A sudden thought struck him. "Does Quarry know? Everything?"

"Certainly not. He would have told Hal at once."

"Then how did you induce him to ..." He nodded at the leather case. To his surprise, his mother smiled.

"More blackmail," she admitted. "Harry writes erotic verses—very elegant, really. I told him that if he didn't do what I asked, I'd tell everyone in the regiment. It was all quite easy," she said, with a certain degree of complacence. "It is *possible* to deal with men. You just have to know how."



Grey was so flabbergasted at the revelation of Harry Quarry's identity as the Sub-Genius that he barely noticed where he was going, and in consequence had walked a good quarter mile before remembering that he had left a coach waiting in a side street near Morning Glory. He turned back, hurrying, trying to think where to start in pursuit of Bernard Adams.

He thought it very likely that his mother was right; Adams was bound for France. That being so, though—would he take ship from the nearest port? Grey could quite possibly catch him up, if that were the case; he had no more than an hour's start, perhaps two. But what if he meant to travel overland, take ship from a more distant port, to confuse pursuit?

Was he expecting pursuit, though? He was presumably acting on the supposition that the duchess had proof of his actions, but it would take more than a day or two for her to make that proof—had it existed—known to anyone who might take action.

And if he did *not* expect pursuit—but he had left his house abruptly, without pausing to pack any personal belongings. That argued precipitate flight ...

Caught up in these musings, and half-running in his anxiety, Grey mistook the side street where he had left his coach, became convinced that the coachman had become tired of waiting and left, realized his

mistake, and went back. By the time he found the coach, he had sweated through his shirt, his arm was throbbing, and his chest had begun to burn. He seized the door of the coach, swung it open, and stepped in, then halted, startled to find someone already sitting inside.

"Here's hoping I find your honor well," one of the O'Higgins brothers said politely. "The devil of a time ye've been about your business, and you'll pardon my sayin' so."

Grey sank onto the squabs, wiping a sleeve across his sweating forehead.

"What are you doing here?"

"Waitin' on yourself, to be sure." He leaned out the window and called up to the coachman, "On, me boy. Where I told you, and be quick, now!"

"And where is that?" Grey was recovering his breath and his wits, and eyed O'Higgins warily.

"The regimental offices, to be sure," the Irishman said. "That's where he'll be."

"He?"

O'Higgins rolled his eyes.

"Bernard Adams. A poor excuse for an Irishman, and him a wicked apostate, too," he added piously, crossing himself.

Grey relapsed against the cushions, realization dawning.

"You read Bates's letter."

"Well, we did, then," O'Higgins agreed, without shame. "Proper shockin', it was."

"Not nearly as shocking as you think," Grey said dryly, beginning to collect himself. "Why do you think Adams is at the regimental offices? And come to that, how do *you* come to be here?"

"Oh, I follied your honor, when you left Adams's house," the Irishman said, airily. "My brother having gone after Mr. Adams, when *he* left, just afore you. Don't be fretting, sir, even if he's gone before we get there, Rafe will stick to him like a bur."

"But why has he—"

"Well, the money, to be sure," Mick said, as though this were obvious. "He hid it in our fortune-teller's cabinet. And he's gone to your brother's office for to get it back—not realizin' that it's gone." The Irishman grinned cheerfully. "We thought the least we could do to show our gratitude to your honor was lead ye to him."

Grey stared at him, barely noticing the tooth-rattling bump of the carriage over rough cobbles as they hurtled through the streets.

"You found it. The money." Something else occurred to him. "Was there anything else there—papers?"

"Oh, there were some moldy bits of trash wedged beneath the clockwork, to be sure; we burnt them," O'Higgins said comfortably. "As to having found any money, I couldn't say as to that, sir. But I will say that, havin' had the chance to think it over, Rafe and me decided that perhaps the army don't suit us after all. We'll be for going back to Ireland, once this business here is done."

The coach rattled round another corner and pulled to a stop, horses blowing, at the corner of Cavendish Square. It was late in the day; the regimental offices would be deserted. Which was, of course, what Adams had waited for, Grey realized.

Tossing money up to the coachman, he turned toward the building, to see a slouching figure detach itself from a patch of evening shadow and come toward him.

"Is he inside, then?" Mick asked, and Rafe nodded.

"Just gone in, not five minutes ago." He glanced at Grey, then up at the building's facade.

"No need to call the guard, I think," he said. "Should your honor care to deal with the matter man to man? We'll see he don't get out, Mick and me." He lounged against the doorjamb, looking most unsoldierly, but thoroughly competent, with a hand on his shillelagh.

"I—yes," Grey said abruptly. "Thank you."

The door was unlocked; he went in and stopped, listening. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck, and emptiness murmured in his ears.

All the doors in the ground-floor corridor were closed. Hal's office was upstairs. Almost by reflex, Grey drew his sword, the whisper of metal against the scabbard cold in the silence.

He made no effort to mute his own footsteps. It didn't matter if Adams heard him coming.

The corridor upstairs was empty, too, lit only by the fading light that came through the casement at the end. A sliver of light showed to the right, though; Hal's door was open.

What ought he to feel? he wondered, as he walked along the hall, bootheels steady as a heartbeat on the floor. He had felt too much, for too long. Now he felt nothing, save the need to continue.

Adams had heard him; he was standing by the desk, his sallow face tense. It relaxed as he recognized Grey, and put out a hand to the desk, to steady himself. "Oh, Lord John," he said. "It's you. I was just looking for—"

"I know what you were looking for," Grey interrupted. "It doesn't matter."

Adams's eyes turned wary on the instant.

"I fear you have mistaken me, sir," he began, and Grey raised the point of his rapier and pressed it to the man's chest.

"No, I haven't." His own voice came oddly to his ears, detached and calm. "You killed my father, and I know it."

The man's eyes went huge, but with panic, not surprise.

"What? You—but, but this is nonsense!" He backed away hastily, hands batting at the blade. "Really, sir, I must protest! Who would tell you such a—such a taradiddle?"

"My mother," Grey said.

Adams went white, pushed the blade aside, and ran. Taken by surprise, Grey went after him, to see him running full-tilt down the corridor—at the end of which stood the burly figure of Rafe O'Higgins, shillelagh at the ready.

Grey followed, fast, and Adams whirled, jerking at the knob of the nearest door, which was locked. Adams's face went tight as Grey approached, and he pressed himself back into the doorframe, hands against the wood.

"You can't kill me!" he said, voice shrill with fear. "I'm not armed." "Neither was the cockroach I stamped on in my quarters last night."

Adams stood his ground for an instant longer, but as Grey drew within lunging distance, his nerve broke and he dodged away, rushed back past Grey, running for his life.

There was nowhere for him to go. The corridor stretched ahead of him, a long dim tunnel, lit only by the rainy twilight of the tall window at the end—a window that opened on thirty feet of empty space. Adams beat upon the locked doors as he passed, shrieking for help, but no one answered; the doors were locked. It was the stuff of nightmare, and Grey wondered briefly whether the nightmare was his, or Adams's.

He hadn't the strength to run himself, and there was no need. His chest pulsed with each heartbeat, and he could hear each single breath echo in his ears. He walked slowly down the corridor, placing one foot in front of the other. The hilt of the sword was slippery in his hand. He found himself drifting to one side or the other, so that his shoulder brushed the wall now and then.

The door just beyond Hal's office opened, and a curious head poked

out. Mr. Beasley, Hal's clerk. Adams saw him and rushed toward him. "Help! Help me! He's mad, he's going to kill me!"

Mr. Beasley pushed his spectacles up his nose, took one look at Grey, lurching drunkenly down the corridor with a sword in his hand, and popped into Hal's office like a mole into its hole. He slammed the door, but was not able to lock it before Adams threw his weight against it.

Both men fell into the office in a tangle of limbs, and Grey hurried as fast as he was able, arriving in time to see Mr. Beasley lurch to the desk, hampered by Adams, who was clawing at his leg. The elderly clerk, now missing both spectacles and wig, snatched a letter opener from the clutter, and with a look of profound indignation, stabbed Adams in the hand with it.

Adams bellowed with pain and let go, rolling up into a ball like a hedgehog. Mr. Beasley, the light of battle in his eye, picked up Volume III of *Histoire de la Dernière Guerre de Bohème* in both hands and brought it down on Adams's head with some force.

Grey braced himself with one hand on the doorjamb, his feeling of being caught in an inescapable dream intensifying.

"Leave him to me, Mr. Beasley," he said gently, seeing the old man, gasping for breath, looking wildly about for a fresh weapon. Mr. Beasley blinked, squinting blindly at him, but then nodded, and without another word, backed out into the hall, dived into his clerk's hole, and shut the door.

"Get up," Grey said to Adams, who was trying to crawl under Hal's desk. "Get up, I said! Or I'll run this straight up your cowardly arse, I swear it." He prodded Adams in the buttock with the tip of his rapier by way of illustration, causing the minister to yelp in fright and bang his head on the underside of the desk.

Moaning and groveling, Adams backed out, and at Grey's peremptory gesture, rose to his feet.

"Don't." He swallowed visibly and wiped a hand across his mouth. "I beg you, sir. Don't take my life. It would be the gravest mistake, I assure you."

"I don't want your fucking life. I want my father's good name back." Sweat was running down Adams's face, and his wig had slid back on his head, showing a thin bristle of grizzled hairs beneath.

"And how do you propose to accomplish that?" he said, the news that Grey didn't mean to kill him seeming to embolden him.

Grey stepped in close and fast, seizing the man's neckcloth in his

free hand and twisting. Adams went red in the face and clawed at him, kicking. One kick landed painfully on his shin, but he disregarded it. The neckcloth popped before Adams's eyes did, though, and Adams sank to his knees, clutching histrionically at his neck.

Grey tossed down his sword, and drew the dagger from its sheath. He sank down on one knee, face to face with Adams, and gripping him by the shoulder, placed the point of the knife just below one eye. He was past threats; with a short, soft jab, he thrust the tip of the dagger into Adams's eye and turned it.

He let go, hearing the thunk of the dagger as it fell to the floor, Adams's shriek as a distant sound, muffled as though it were underwater. Everything swam about him and he closed his eyes against the dizziness.

He had to struggle to stand up; it felt as though two hundred-weight of sandbags rested on his shoulders. But he managed, and stood swaying, waves of hot and cold washing over him, the muscles of his breast on fire, his left arm a dead weight by his side.

Adams was curled into himself, both hands clasped to his eye, making a high, thin moaning noise that Grey found very irritating. Small drops of blood spattered the confusion of papers on Hal's desk.

"My eye, my eye! You have blinded me!"

"You have one left with which to write your confession," Grey said. He was very tired. But summoning some last vestige of strength, he raised his voice and shouted, "Mr. Beasley! I want you!"

Chapter 35



"I Do Renounce Them"

Reginald Holmes, head steward of White's Chocolate House, was spending a peaceful late evening in going over the members' accounts in his office. He had just rung the bell for a waiter to bring him another whisky to facilitate this task when the sounds of an ungodly rumpus reached him from the public rooms below, shouts, cheers, and the noise of overturning furniture causing him to upset the ink.

"What's going on *now*, for God's sake?" he asked crossly, mopping at the puddle with his handkerchief as one of the waiters appeared in his doorway. "Do these men never sleep? Bring me a cloth, Bob, will you?"

"Yes, sir." The waiter bowed respectfully. "The Duke of Pardloe has arrived, sir, with his brother. The duke's respects, sir, and he would like you to come and witness the settling of a wager in the book."

"The Duke of—" Holmes stood up, forgetting the ink on his sleeve. "And he wants to settle a wager?"

"Yes, sir. His Grace is *very* drunk, sir," the waiter added delicately. "And he's brought a number of friends in a similar condition."

"Yes, I hear." Holmes stood for a moment, considering. Disjoint strains of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" reached him through the floor. He took up his accounts ledger and his quill, and turned to the page headed *Earl of Melton*. Drawing a neat line through this, he amended the heading to *Duke of Pardloe*, and with a flourish, inserted beneath it a new item reading, *Breakages*.

The singers had now reached the second verse and some semblance of unity.

"We won't go home until mor-ning, We won't go home until mor-ning, We won't go home until mor-ning, 'Til day-light doth appear!"

"Fetch up a cask of the '21 Santo Domingo," Mr. Holmes instructed the waiter, writing busily. "I'll put it on His Grace's account."

It was with an aching head and dark circles beneath his eyes, but impeccably attired in blue-striped silk and cambric ruffles, that Lord John Grey took his place by the baptismal font at St. James Church next day and received several yards of white satin and Mechlin lace, within which he was assured was his goddaughter, Lady Dorothea Jacqueline Benedicta Grey. Minnie had toyed with the notion of naming her daughter Prudence or Chastity, but Grey had dissuaded her, on the grounds that it was unfair to burden a child with such an onerous presumption of virtue.

The general, newly returned from the Indies, and Lady Stanley were there, standing close together, her hand upon his arm in a picture of the nicest marital affection. Grey smiled at his mother, who smiled back—and then stepped forward in alarm as the child wriggled in its wrappings and Grey momentarily lost his grip.

Snatching her granddaughter from destruction, Benedicta settled the christening robes more securely, and with a look of some reservation, handed the child back to her son.

Minnie, on the far side of the font, eyed him severely, but was occupied in restraining her own three sons, all of them decently silent, but wriggling like small satin-clad worms. Hal, beside her, appeared to have fallen asleep on his feet.

Mr. Gainsborough, the portrait artist who had been commissioned to commemorate the christening, skulked in the shadows, motioning to his assistant and squinting back and forth from his sketching pad to the scene before him. He caught Grey's eye and motioned to him to lift his chin and turn toward the light.

Grey coughed politely and turned instead toward the priest, who was speaking to him.

"Dost thou renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desire of the same, and the carnal desires of the flesh, so that thou wilt not follow, nor be led of them?"

"I do renounce them." Minnie's sister, the child's godmother, stood beside him, and murmured the words with him.

"Dost thou believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth? And in Jesus Christ, His only-begotten son, our Lord? And that He was conceived by the Holy Ghost; born of the Virgin Mary; that He suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead, and buried; that He went down into hell and also did rise again ..."

Grey looked down into the sleeping face of innocence, and swore. He did not know if he might believe. But for her, he would try.



Following the christening, the family rattled home by coach to the Grey manor on the edge of Hyde Park. The trees were in their autumn glory, their falling leaves borne on the wind, and bits of red and gold and brown flew up in showers from the wheels as they passed.

Minnie and her sister went up to return the baby to her nurse, but the boys demanded food, and shedding their pumps, satin coats, and linen neckcloths with abandon, besieged their father for nourishment.

"I want almond biscuits, Papa!"

"No, apple 'n' raisin pie!"

"Treacle tart, treacle tart!" piped Henry, raising a general cheer.

"Yes, yes, yes," Hal said, trying in vain to quell the riot. He put a hand to his head, which seemed somewhat the worse for wear. "Come along, Cook will find us something, I daresay."

He ushered his troops firmly before him, but then paused and looked back at Grey, hand on the baize door to the kitchen passageway.

"Will you do us the honor to share a dish of treacle tart for breakfast, my lord?" he asked politely.

"With all my heart," John said, and grinned exceedingly. "Your Grace."

He handed his cloak to the footman and made to follow them, but was stopped by a glimpse of his own name. The early post had been left on the silver salver by the door, and a letter addressed to Lord John Grey lay on top. Frowning, he picked it up. Who would send a letter to him here?

He broke the seal and unfolded two sheets. The first was a drawing; a sketch of the Roman Forum. He recognized the view, from the top of the Capitoline Hill. The message on the second sheet was brief, written in a clear, round hand.

The seagulls on the Tiber call all night, and call your name. "Ave!" they cry.

"Ave."

There was no signature, of course.

"Ave," Grey said softly, "atque vale, frater meus." Hail—and farewell. And touching the corner of the note to the candle flame, held it until his fingers began to scorch, then dropped it on the salver, where it flared and burnt to ash. He put aside the drawing—to remember.

AUTHOR'S NOTES



"Hogg house." When Lord John reflects that surely Geneva's body does not lie "in some hogg house or desolate shed," he is not considering that her family might have left her in a pig-sty. A "hogg house" was a storage building for dried peat.

Homophobia. I am greatly indebted both to Norton Rictor (*Mother Clap's Molly-House*) and to Byrne Fone (*Homophobia: A History*) for insight into the perception and treatment of homosexuals in the mideighteenth century. Quotes in this book regarding the social and legal prosecution of "sodomites" are taken from *Homophobia*, and are actual quotes from the newspapers and other periodicals of the period.

Horace Walpole was one of the best-known letter-writers of the early-to mid-eighteenth century, and his collected correspondence is as valuable to a student of that period as Samuel Pepys's diaries are to an earlier one. Fourth son of the formidable Robert Walpole (First Earl of Orford, who more or less invented the office of prime minister, though he himself refused to use that title), Horace was not political himself, but had great insight—expressed with wit and irony—into the social, military, and political processes of his *milieu*.

Prejudice. Speaking of phobias ... historical attitudes in England toward the Irish, Scottish, etc. are rendered as they were (interpreted through writings of the period), rather than as modern political correctness might desire (e.g., descriptions of the Irish gathering "like fleas" and other opprobrious remarks are taken from primary sources of the period, as quoted in M. Dorothy George's *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* and Liza Picard's *Dr. Johnson's London*).

A Note on Scots/Scotch/Scottish

So far as I know (judging from published material from the period), everybody in the British Isles (including the Scots), used "Scotch" to refer to the people (as well as the whisky) up until about 1950. At which point, the SNP (Scottish Nationalist Party) got their feet under them and started in.

I'm sure you've noticed that one of the first things a political action group representing a minority does is to respecify the name of said group as a means of asserting independence—i.e., "negroes" became either "black" or "African American," "Indians" became "Native Americans," etc. By the same token, the Scotch became "Scots." (In all justice, "Scots" as a term referring to the people was certainly in use for centuries prior to that; however, "Scotch," "Scotchman," etc. were also acceptable and widely used; post-SNP, this was seen as deeply offensive.)

Just to be confusing, "Scots" is also the term used (both historically and in modern times) for the Scottish dialect—or language as the case may be (again, with the political activism). I asked a friend—a well-known linguist and the dean of the college of Arts and Letters at a prominent university—what the position was on Scots in linguistic circles: Dialect of English, or distinct language? She (an Englishwoman) looked round to be sure we were not overheard (we were at a cocktail party, surrounded by wealthy alumni, none of them either Scottish or linguists), lowered her voice, and said, "Well, if you're Scottish, then of *course* it's a separate language—and if you aren't, then plainly it's not."

Anyway, "Scotch" and its derivatives ("Scotchman," "Scotchwoman") were used by everybody—including Scottish people (I have a book of popular jokes and comic routines done by Sir Harry Lauder—a popular Scottish comedian of the '40s and '50s, which uses "Scotch" as a designation of people throughout) up 'til about the midtwentieth century. You still see such references in novels published later than that, but by about 1970, "Scot," "Scots," and "Scottish" had become pretty much *de rigueur*, and "Scotch" was now strictly limited to whisky and 3M's" brand of transparent tape. In the eighteenth century, though, "Scotchman" was still common usage.

The Seven Years' War

I made a conscious decision not to provide detailed explanations, maps, etc., regarding the political, military, and geographical nuances of the Seven Years' War. While this was a complex and fascinating conflict—it was, in many ways, the first "world war," being fought on several continents and involving virtually all the countries of Europe and their colonies—this isn't actually a book *about* the Seven Years' War; it's a book about a soldier.

Lord John Grey, Major in His Majesty's army, is a career soldier. He doesn't ask whether a particular cause is worth his labor or his life; he fights because it's his duty and his calling. Therefore, other than indicating theaters of military operation, and brief references to important battles or events, I've focused on the details of an English officer's daily life, rather than on the larger issues of the war.

For those military buffs interested in the Seven Years' War, there are masses of material available—far too much to cite even summarily here. For those who would enjoy a quick overview, though, allow me to recommend Osprey Publishing's *The Seven Years' War*, by Daniel Marston, part of their Essential Histories series (ISBN 1-84176-191-5, Osprey Publishing Ltd., London, 2001).

itish regiments

Owing to the way in which British army regiments were named—i.e., in a generally sequential numbering system—I was obliged to appropriate an existing regimental number of approximately the right vintage for the Duke of Pardloe's fictional regiment. The real 46th Regiment of Foot was the Duke of Cornwall's regiment, also known as "Cornwall's Light Infantry" and "The Red Feathers."

uiform notes

There was a great deal of variation in uniform during the Seven Years' War, owing to the great number and variety of political entities participating. For example: While most people are accustomed nowadays to thinking of the British as "redcoats," and thus to assuming that all British uniforms *were* red, in fact, they were not. Soldiers of the Royal Artillery during this period wore blue uniforms, while—confusingly enough—the French artillery wore red.

This book is for Barbara Schnell, my dear friend and German voice

Acknowledgments



The author would like to thank all the kind people who have given me information and help in the course of this novel, particularly—

... Mr. Richard Jacobs, Krefeld local historian, and his wife Monika, who walked the battlefield at Krefeld ("Crefeld" is the older, eighteenth-century spelling) and the *Landwehr* with me, explaining the local geography.

... the staff of the small museum at Hückelsmay—where cannonballs from the battle of Crefeld are still embedded in the walls of the house—for their kind reception and useful information.

... Barbara Schnell and her family, without whom I would probably never have heard of Crefeld.

... Mr. Howarth Penney for his kind interest, and his most useful gift of *Titles and Forms of Address* (published by A&C Black, London), which was of great help in negotiating the perilous straits of British aristocratic nomenclature. Any error in such matters is either the author's mistake—or the author's exercise of fictional license. While we do strive for the greatest degree of historical accuracy possible, we are not above making things up now and then. (That is not, by the way, a Royal "we" I just mean me and the people who live inside my head.) A Duke, however, *is* addressed as "Your Grace," and a Duke's younger son(s) addressed as "Lord___."

... Mr. Horace Walpole, that inveterate correspondent whose witty and detailed letters provided me with a vivid window into eighteenthcentury society.

... Project Gutenberg, for providing me with excellent access to the complete correspondence of Mr. Walpole.

... Gus the dachshund, and Otis Stout the pug (aka "Hercules"), who generously allowed the use of their personae. (Yes, I do know that dachshunds were not an official breed in the eighteenth century, but I'm sure that some inventive German dog-fancier had the idea prior to their establishment with the AKC. Badgers have been around for a long time.)

... Christine Reynolds, Assistant Keeper of the Muniments of the Parish Church of St. Margaret's, for extremely useful information regarding the history and structures of the church, including a very useful organ loft under which to give birth, and Catherine MacGregor for suggesting St. Margaret's and for finding Ms. Reynolds.

... Patricia Fuller, Paulette Langguth, Pamela Patchet, pamelalass, and doubtless several other people *not* beginning with "P," for information regarding eighteenth-century public exhibitions of art, and the history of specific artists and paintings.

... Philip Larkin, whose remarkably revealing portrait of the first Duke of Buckingham (presently displayed in the Royal Portrait Gallery in London) provided one of the first seeds of inspiration for this book. (And neither I nor Mr. Larkin are maligning the first Duke of Buckingham, either.)

| Laura Watkins, late of the Stanford Polo Club, for expert opinion as to the mechanics of a horse jumping ditches. |
|--|
| "oorjanie" of the Ladies of Lallybroch for graciously allowing the star employee of an up-and-coming brothel to share her name. |
| Karen Watson, our London correspondent, of Her Majesty's Customs and Excise, for her generous sleuthing through the history and byways of her beloved city, to lend a reasonable verisimilitude to Lord John's geographical excursions. |
| Laura Bailey, for insight and advice regarding eighteenth-century clothing and custom. |
| David Niven, for his very entertaining and honest autobiographies, <i>The Moon's a Balloon</i> , and <i>Bring on the Empty Horses</i> , which included a useful look at the social workings of a British regiment (as well as helpful information regarding how to survive a long formal dinner). Also, George MacDonald Fraser, for his <i>MacAuslan in the Rough</i> , a collection of stories about life in a WWII Highland Regiment. |
| Isaac Trion, whose hand-drawn watercolor map of the battle of Crefeld, drawn in 1758, adorns my wall, and whose painstaking details adorn the story. |
| The assorted gentlemen (and ladies) who were kind enough to read and comment on sex scenes. (As a matter of public interest, a poll |

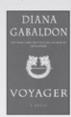
regarding one such scene came back with the following results: "Positive: I want to know more—82%; Negative: This makes me uncomfortable—4%; Slightly shocked, but not put off—10%; Neutral—4%.)

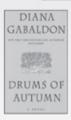
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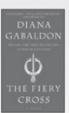
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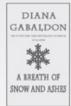














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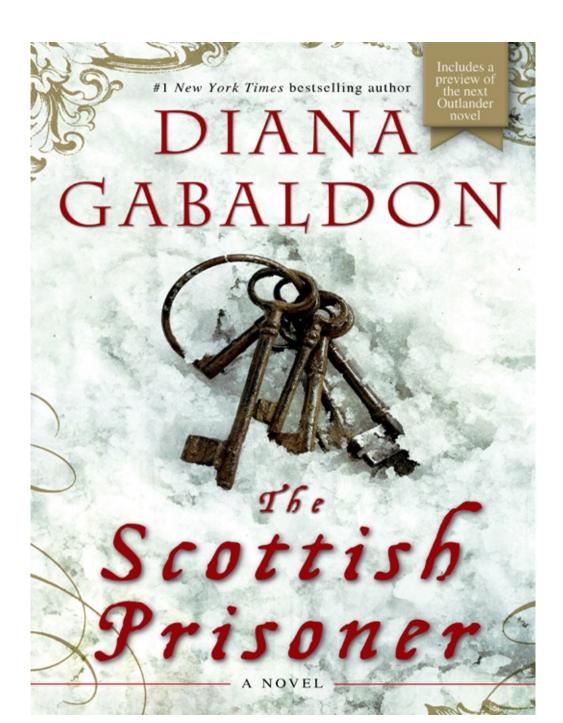
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The Scottish Prisoner

A Novel

Delacorte Press New York

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gabaldon, Diana.

The Scottish prisoner: a novel/Diana Gabaldon.

p. cm.

eISBN: 978-0-345-53349-4

1. Seven Years' War, 1756–1763–Fiction. I. Title.

PS3557.A22S36 2011 813'.54—dc23 2011034429

Jacket design and photograph: © Henry Steadman

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v3.1_r2

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Preface



Chronology of the Novels: When to Read What?

The Lord John novellas and novels* are sequential, but are built to stand alone; you don't need to read them in order.

In terms of their relationship to the larger Outlander novels: These books are part of the overall series, but are focused for the most part on those times in Lord John's life when he's not "onstage" in the main novels. This particular book focuses also on a part of Jamie Fraser's life not covered in the main novels.

All of the Lord John novels take place between 1756 and 1766—this one is set in 1760—and in terms of the overall Outlander novels/timeline, they thus occur more or less in the middle of *Voyager*. So you can read any of them, in any order, once you've read *Voyager*, without getting lost.

* There are also a couple of short stories—and will eventually be more—dealing with minor events, minor characters, and/or lacunae in the main books. These are presently published in various anthologies, but will eventually be collected in book form.

"A Leaf on the Wind of All Hallows" appears in the anthology *Songs of Love and Death* (edited by George R.R. Martin and Gardner Dozois). This is a short story set in WWII that tells the story of what *really* happened to Roger MacKenzie's parents, Jerry and Dolly.

"The Space Between" is a novella that will appear in an anthology titled *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination* (edited by John Joseph Adams), which will likely appear sometime in 2012. This story is set mostly in Paris and involves Joan McKimmie (Marsali's younger

sister), Michael Murray (Young Ian's older brother), the Comte St. Germain (no, of course he's not dead, don't be silly), and Mother Hildegarde.

Prologue



If you deal in death routinely, there are two paths. Either it becomes routine, in which case ye risk killing for nothing and thus lose your soul—for if the lives ye take are worth nothing, neither is yours.

Or you become that much more aware of the value of a life and that much more reluctant to take one without the direst necessity. That way you risk losing your own life—there are the quick and there are the dead, and I do not mean what St. Paul meant about that—but not your soul.

Soldiers manage by dividing themselves. They're one man in the killing, another at home, and the man that dandles his bairn on his knee has nothing to do wi' the man who crushed his enemy's throat with his boot. So he tells himself, sometimes successfully.

But it marks you, killing. No matter why it's done.

It's a brand upon your heart, and while it may heal, the mark canna be removed, save by a blade. All ye can hope for is a cleaner scar.

SECTION I



The Fate of Fuses



April Fool

Helwater, the Lake District April 1, 1760

It was so cold out, he thought his cock might break off in his hand—if he could find it. The thought passed through his sleep-mazed mind like one of the small, icy drafts that darted through the loft, making him open his eyes.

He could find it now; had waked with his fist wrapped round it and desire shuddering and twitching over his skin like a cloud of midges. The dream was wrapped just as tightly round his mind, but he knew it would fray in seconds, shredded by the snores and farts of the other grooms. He needed her, needed to spill himself with the feel of her touch still on him.

Hanks stirred in his sleep, chuckled loudly, said something incoherent, and fell back into the void, murmuring, "Bugger, bugger, bugger ..."

Jamie said something similar under his breath in the Gaelic and flung back his blanket. Damn the cold.

He made his way down the ladder into the half-warm, horse-smelling fug of the barn, nearly falling in his haste, ignoring a splinter in his bare foot. He hesitated in the dark, still urgent. The horses wouldn't care, but if they noticed him, they'd make enough noise, perhaps, to wake the others.

Wind struck the barn and went booming round the roof. A strong chilly draft with a scent of snow stirred the somnolence, and two or three of the horses shifted, grunting and whickering. Overhead, a murmured "'ugger" drifted down, accompanied by the sound of someone turning over and pulling the blanket up round his ears, defying reality.

Claire was still with him, vivid in his mind, solid in his hands. He could imagine that he smelled her hair in the scent of fresh hay. The memory of her mouth, those sharp white teeth ... He rubbed his nipple, hard and itching beneath his shirt, and swallowed.

His eyes were long accustomed to the dark; he found the vacant loose box at the end of the row and leaned against its boards, cock already in his fist, body and mind yearning for his lost wife.

He'd have made it last if he could, but he was fearful lest the dream go altogether, and he surged into the memory, groaning. His knees gave way in the aftermath and he slid slowly down the boards of the box into the loose piled hay, shirt rucked round his thighs and his heart pounding like a kettledrum.

Lord, that she might be safe was his last conscious thought. She and the child.



He plunged at once into a sleep so deep and luxurious that when a hand shook him by the shoulder, he didn't spring to his feet but merely stirred sluggishly, momentarily befuddled by the prickle of hay on his bare legs. His instincts came back to life in sudden alarm and he flung himself over, getting his feet under him in the same motion that put his back against the wall of the loose box.

There was a gasp from the small form in the shadows before him, and he classified it as feminine just in time to restrain himself from reflexive violence.

"Who's that?" he demanded. He spoke low, his voice hoarse with sleep, and the form swayed back a little farther, exhibiting dubiousness.

He was in no mood for foolishness and shot out a hand, grabbing her by the arm. She squealed like a pig and he let go as though she were red-hot, cursing himself mentally as he heard the startled grunts and rustlings of his fellow grooms overhead.

"What the devil's that?" Crusoe demanded, in a voice like a clogged pipe. Jamie heard him clear his throat and spit thickly into his half-filled pot, then bellow down the ladder, "Who's there?"

The shadowy form was making wild motions, beseeching him to be silent. The horses were half awake, snorting with mild confusion but not panicked; they were used to Crusoe shouting in the night. He did it whenever he had the money to buy drink, waking from nightmares in a cold sweat, shrieking at his demons.

Jamie rubbed a hand over his face, trying to think. If Crusoe and Hanks didn't already know he was gone, they'd notice in the next few seconds.

"Rats in the feed," he shouted up. "I killed one." It was a feeble story; there were always rats in the feed, and no one would have stirred a finger to investigate their noises in the dead of night, let alone hunt them in the dark.

Hanks made a sound of disgust, rustling his bedclothes. "The Scotchman's buggering the horses again," he said conversationally to Crusoe, though clearly speaking loud enough to be heard below. "Ought to speak to his lordship about it."

Crusoe grunted angrily. "Well, whatever the fuck you're doin', MacKenzie, be quiet about it!" he shouted, and flung himself over on his pallet in a flurry of bother.

Jamie's heart was pounding again, with annoyed agitation.

He reached for the young woman—no auld crone squealed like that—but slowly this time, and she made no demur when he took her by the arm. He led her down the stone-flagged aisle between the stalls and outside, shoving the sliding door to behind them with a rumble.

It was cold enough out to make him gasp, an icy wind flattening his shirt to his body and stealing his breath. The moon was obscured by racing cloud, but enough glow came from the sky for him to make out the identity of his intruder.

"What the *devil* d'ye want?" he snapped. "And how did ye ken where I was?" It had dawned on him that she hadn't just stumbled over him in the hay, for why would a lady's maid be poking about the stables at night? She'd come looking for him.

Betty lifted her chin.

"There's a man what wants to talk to you. He sent me to say. And I saw you come down from the loft."

That last sentence floated in the air between them, charged like a Leyden jar. Touch it, and there'd be a spark that would stand his hair on end. Christ. Did she have any notion what it was he'd been doing?

He caught the hint of a smirk on her face before a cloud shadow obscured it, and his ears went suddenly hot with rising blood.

"What man?" he said. "Where?"

"An Irishman," she said. "But a gentleman. He says to tell you the green branch will flower. And to meet him on the fells, where the old shepherd's hut is."

The shock of it nearly made him forget the cold, though the wind was ripping through the linen of his shirt and he was shivering so hard that he found it hard to speak without his voice shaking. And *that* wouldn't do.

"I've nothing to do wi' any Irishmen," he snapped. "And if he comes back, ye may tell him so." He put a hand on the door, turning to go in. "I'm going to my bed. Good night to ye."

A light hand ran down his back and stopped just above his buttocks. He could feel the hair there bristle like a badger's, and not from the cold.

"Your bed'll be cold as death by now." She'd stepped close; he could feel the slight warmth of her body behind him, the heat of her breath through his shirt. And she still had her hand on him. Lower now. "Mine's a good deal warmer."

Holy Lord. Arse clenched, he moved deliberately away from her and pushed the door open.

"Good night," he said, without turning round, and stepped into the rustling, inquisitive dark of the stable. He saw her for an instant as he turned to shut the door, caught in the flickering moonlight, her eyes narrowed like an angry cat's.



He made no effort to be quiet, climbing the ladder back to the loft. Hanks and Crusoe were pointedly silent, though he thought neither one was asleep. God knew what they'd say about tonight's incident, but he wasn't disposed to be worrit over that pair. He'd enough else to think on.

Betty, for one. For if anyone on Helwater estate knew his great secret, it was she. Betty had been Geneva Dunsany's lady's maid before becoming maid to her sister after Geneva's death. How much of a confidante had she been, though?

He could still feel the pressure of her hand on his backside and squirmed his arse irritably into his pallet, the straw under his blanket poking him. Damn the woman. She'd given him an eye when he'd first come to Helwater from Ardsmuir prison three years before, a paroled Jacobite traitor, but a lady's maid had little to do with a groom, and it was easy enough not to see her long-eyed glances when she came to tell him that Lady Geneva wanted her horse. Not so easy to

avoid Lady Geneva.

He grimaced in the dark at thought of Geneva. He wasn't feeling charitable at the moment but crossed himself nonetheless and said a brief prayer for the repose of her soul, as he did whenever she came into his mind. He owed her that much, poor lass, no matter what she'd done to him.

But why the devil was Betty playing the loon now? Geneva had been dead more than two years, and Betty herself had come back to Helwater soon after her mistress's death in childbirth. She'd not spoken a word to him in the last six months; why go to the risk of coming to the stable at night—and, come to that, what had the silly wee bitch intended? Climbing the creaking ladder and sliding into his bed unannounced, with Hanks and Crusoe curled under their blankets six feet away, their great ears flapping? Sneaking him into the servants' attic?

She couldn't have meant to wait below for him; she hadn't known he'd come down. For that matter ... she said she'd seen him descend the ladder, but she hadn't come to him then. Why not?

The logical answer presented itself, with a small jolt to the pit of his stomach. She hadn't been looking for him at all.

He sat bolt upright before the train of his thought had entirely finished, his body grasping the point at once. She'd come to meet someone else, and that meeting had been interrupted by his own inopportune appearance.

An intruder couldn't have hidden in an occupied stall or anywhere else ... save the vacant loose box near the door.

And that's why she woke me, he thought, hands clenching on the blanket. She had to draw me away, so the fellow could get out. Christ, he was in there with me! His skin prickled with mingled embarrassment and fury. The notion that ... could it be possible ... surely he would have sensed someone ...?

But he wouldn't. He'd been so desperate to find solitude in which to reach Claire for that one necessary moment that he wouldn't have noticed a bear lurking in the shadows, provided it hadn't tried to interrupt him.

One of the cocks in the hen coop crowed, two more on its heels. A sleepy "Oh, fuuuck" came from a nearby pallet. A loud rustle of someone sitting up, and the hawking and snorting started. Hanks smoked heavily—when he could afford it—and took a good quarter hour to start breathing in the morning.

Jamie breathed deep himself, thinking. Then flung back his blanket and rose to meet what was likely to be an interesting day.



Erse

London Argus House, residence of Harold, Duke of Pardloe

Lord John Grey eyed the ribbon-tied packet on his knee as though it were a bomb. In fact, it couldn't have been more explosive had it been filled with black powder and equipped with a fuse.

His attitude as he handed it to his brother must have reflected this knowledge, for Hal fixed him with a gimlet eye and raised one brow. He said nothing, though, flicking loose both ribbon and wrapping with an impatient gesture and bending his head at once over the thick sheaf of densely written sheets that emerged.

Grey couldn't stand to watch him read through Charles Carruthers's postmortem denunciation, recalling each damning page as Hal read it. He stood up and went to the window of the library that looked out into the back garden of Argus House, ignoring the swish of turning pages and the occasional blasphemous mutterings behind him.

Hal's three boys were playing a game of tigers and hunters, leaping out at one another from behind the shrubbery with shrill roars, followed by shrieks of delight and yells of "Bang! Take that, you striped son of a bitch!" The nurse seated on the edge of the fish pool, keeping a tight grip on baby Dottie's gown, looked up at this but merely rolled her eyes with a martyred expression. *Flesh and blood has its limits*, her expression said clearly, and she resumed paddling a hand in the water, luring one of the big goldfish close so that Dottie could drop bits of bread to it.

John longed to be down there with them. It was a rare day for early April, and he felt the pulse of it in his blood, urging him to be outside, running barefoot through young grass. Running naked down into the water ... The sun was high, flooding warm through the glass of the French windows, and he closed his eyes and turned his face up to it.

Siverly. The name floated in the darkness behind his eyes, pasted across the blank face of an imagined cartoon major, drawn in uniform, an outsize sword brandished in his hand and bags of money stuffed into the back of his breeches, obscene bulges under the skirt of his coat. One or two had fallen to the ground, bursting open so that you could see the contents—coin in one, the other filled with what looked like poppets, small wooden doll-like things. Each one with a tiny knife through its heart.

Hal swore in German behind him. He must have reached the part about the rifles; German oaths were reserved for the most stringent occasions, French being used for minor things like a burnt dinner, and Latin for formal insults committed to paper. Minnie wouldn't let either Hal or John swear in English in the house, not wanting the boys to acquire low habits. John could have told her it was too late for such caution but didn't.

He turned round to see Hal on his feet, pale with rage, a sheet of paper crumpled in one hand.

"How dare he? How dare he?"

A small knot he hadn't known was there dissolved under John's ribs. His brother had built his own regiment, the 46th, out of his own blood and bones; no one was less likely to overlook or condone military malfeasance. Still, Hal's response reassured him.

"You believe Carruthers, then?"

Hal glared at him.

"Don't you? You knew the man."

He *had* known Charles Carruthers—in more than one sense.

"Yes, I believed him when he told me about Siverly in Canada, and *that*"—he nodded at the papers, thrown in a sprawl across Hal's desk—"is even more convincing. You'd think he'd been a lawyer."

He could still see Carruthers's face, pale in the dimness of his attic room in the little garrison town of Gareon, drawn with ill health but set with grim determination to live long enough to see justice done. Charlie hadn't lived that long, but long enough to write down every detail of the case against Major Gerald Siverly and to entrust it to Grey.

He was the fuse that would detonate this particular bomb. And he was all too familiar with what happened to fuses, once lit.



"What is this?" Hal was frowning at one of the papers. Grey put down the book in his hand and came to look. The paper was in Carruthers's handwriting, as painstakingly executed as the rest; Carruthers had known he was setting down evidence for a court-martial and had done his best to make it legible.

It was legible—insofar as Grey could make out the various letters that composed the words. But the words themselves looked like nothing he had ever seen before.

Éistigí, Fir na dtrí náisiún.

Éistigí, le glór na hadhairc ag caoineadh san goath.

Ag teácht as an oiche.

Tá sí ag teacht.

Tá an Banrion ag teacht.

Sé na deonaigh, le gruaig agus súil in bhfiainne,

Ag leanúint lucht mhóir an Bhanríon.

It looked like the sheerest gibberish. At the same time, there was something ... civilized—was that the word?—in its appearance. The words bore all manner of strange accents and looked like no language with which Grey was familiar, and yet the text was punctuated in what seemed a logical fashion. It was laid out upon the page in the style of verse, with evident stanzas and what certainly looked like a repeated refrain—perhaps it was the text of a song?

"Have you ever seen anything like that before?" he asked Hal. His brother shook his head, still frowning.

"No. It looks vaguely as though someone had made an effort to transliterate Greek, using the Roman alphabet—but the words certainly aren't Greek."

"Nor Hebrew," Grey said, peering at the first line. "Russian, perhaps? Turkish?"

"Perhaps," Hal said dubiously. "But why, for God's sake?"

Grey ran through in his mind what he knew of Carruthers's career but turned up no particular connections with exotic languages. Neither had Charlie ever struck him as being remarkably well educated; he was always getting into a muddle over his bills when Grey first knew him, through simple inability to add, and his French was fluent but uncouth.

"Everything else in the packet pertains to Siverly and his misdeeds. So logically this must, too."

"Was Carruthers particularly logical?" Hal eyed the stack of papers. "He's legible, I'll give him that. You knew him a great deal better than I, though—what d'you think?" Grey thought a lot of things, most of which he didn't intend to speak out loud. He had known Charlie Carruthers fairly well—in the Biblical sense, among others—though for only a short time and that time, more than ten years ago. Their meeting in Canada the year before had been brief—but Charlie had known Grey very well, too. He'd known who to trust with his inflammatory legacy.

"Not particularly logical, no," he answered slowly. "Rather determined, though. Once he'd made up his mind to something, he'd see it through."

And he nearly had. In spite of a failing heart, Carruthers had clung to life stubbornly, compiling this damning mass of testimony, determined to bring Major Gerald Siverly to justice.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice," he had whispered in John's ear, during their last meeting. Grey picked up the little stack of papers and shuffled them neatly into order, smelling in memory the scent of that attic room in Gareon, near Quebec. Pine boards, hot with a stifling turpentine perfume. Soured milk and the moldy sweetness of mouse droppings. The scent of Charlie's skin, sweating with heat and with illness. The touch of his deformed hand on Grey's face, a light touch but strong with the force of memory.

"I hunger, John," he'd said, his breath heavy with approaching death. "And you thirst. You won't fail me."

Grey didn't intend to. With slow deliberation, he tapped the papers on the table, squaring them, and set them neatly down.

"Is there enough here, do you think?" he asked his brother. Enough to cause a general court-martial to be called, he meant—enough to convict Siverly of corruption, of abuse of his office. Of misconduct amounting to the murder of his own men. Siverly did not belong to Hal's regiment, but he did belong to the army to which Hal—and Grey himself,

come to that—had given most of their lives.

"More than enough," Hal said, rubbing a hand over his chin. It was late in the day; the bristles of his beard made a tiny rasping sound. "If the witnesses can be found. If they'll speak." He spoke abstractedly, though, still puzzling over the mysterious sheet.

Do chuir siad na Róisíní Bhán ar an bealach go bua. Agus iad toilteannach agus buail le híobáirt an teannta ifrinn. Iad ag leanúint le bealach glór an Bhanríon.

"Do choo-ir see-ad na Royseence ..." he read aloud, slowly. "Is it a cipher, do you suppose? Or a code?"

"Is there a difference?"

"Yes, there is," Hal said absently. He held it up to the light from the window, presumably to see if anything showed through, then bent and held it over the fire.

Grey stopped his involuntary move to snatch the paper; there were ways of doing secret writing, and most of those showed up with heat. Though why one would add an overtly mysterious code to a paper with hidden writing, thus drawing attention to it ...

The paper was beginning to scorch and curl at the edges, but nothing was showing up save the original words, cryptic as ever. Hal pulled it back and dropped it smoking on the desk, shaking his fingers.

"For what the observation is worth," Grey said, gingerly picking up the hot sheet, "I don't see why Carruthers would trouble himself with encoding this particular document. Given the rest of it, I mean."

Hal compressed his lips but nodded. "The rest of it" included specific denunciations of a number of men—some of them powerful—who had been involved in Siverly's defalcations. If Carruthers trusted Grey to handle such incendiary stuff, what might he have balked at?

"Besides, Charlie knew he was dying," Grey said more quietly. He laid the sheet on top of the others and again began to tidy them into a square. "He left this packet addressed to me. He expected me to use it. Why would he have tried to conceal some part of the information from me?"

Hal shrugged, acknowledging the argument.

"Then why is it here? Included by mistake?" Even as he suggested this, he was shaking his head. The packet itself had been meticulously assembled, with documents in chronological order. Some of the papers were Carruthers's own testimony; some were statements signed by other witnesses; some were original army documents—or perhaps copies made by a clerk. It was impossible to tell, unless the original had borne a stamp. The whole bundle spoke of care, precision—and the passion that had driven Carruthers past his own weakness in order to accomplish Siverly's destruction.

"It is Carruthers's hand?" Unable to let a puzzle alone, Hal reached out and took the sheet of gibberish from the top of the stack.

"Yes," Grey said, though that much was obvious. Carruthers wrote a clear, slanted hand, with oddly curled tails on the descending letters. He came to look over Hal's shoulder, trying to see if the paper provided any clue they could have missed.

"It's laid out like verse," he observed, and, with the observation, something fluttered uneasily at the back of his mind. But what? He tried to catch a glimpse of it, but the thought skittered away like a spider under a stone.

"Yes." Hal drew a finger down the page, slowly. "But look at how these words are repeated. I think it might be a cipher, after all—if that were the case, you might be picking a different set of letters out of each line, even though the lines look much the same in themselves." He straightened up,

shaking his head. "I don't know. It could be a cipher that Carruthers stumbled onto in Siverly's papers but to which he hadn't the key—and so he merely copied it and passed it on in hopes that you might discover the key yourself."

"That makes some sense." John rocked back on his heels, narrowing his eyes at his brother. "How do you come to know so much about ciphers and secret writings?"

Hal hesitated, but then smiled. Hal smiled rarely, but it transformed his face when he did.

"Minnie," he said.

"What?" Grey said, uncomprehending. His sister-in-law was a kind, pretty woman, who managed his difficult brother with great aplomb, but what—

"My secret weapon," Hal admitted, still smiling at whatever thought amused him. "Her father was Raphael Wattiswade."

"I've never heard of Raphael Wattiswade."

"You weren't meant to," his brother assured him, "and neither was anyone else. Wattiswade was a dealer in rare books—traveled to and from the Continent regularly, under the name Andrew Rennie. He was also a dealer in intelligence. A spymaster ... who had no sons."

Grey looked at his brother for a moment.

"Tell me," he begged, "that her father did not employ Minnie as a spy."

"He did, the scrofulous old bugger," Hal replied briefly. "I caught her in my study one night during a party, magicking the locked drawer of my desk. That's how I met her."

Grey didn't bother asking what had been in the drawer. He smiled himself and picked up the decanter of sherry from the tea tray, unstoppering it.

"I gather you did not immediately have her arrested and taken before a magistrate?"

Hal took a sherry glass and held it out.

"No. I had her on the hearth rug."

The decanter slipped from Grey's fingers, and he caught it again by pure luck, splashing only a little.

"Did you, indeed?" he managed.

"Give me that, butterfingers." Hal took the decanter from him, and poured carefully, eyes fixed on the rising amber liquid. "And, yes, I did."

Grey wondered, reeling, whether Minnie had been a virgin and decided instantly not to ask.

"Then I put her into a coach, made her tell me her address, and said I would call on her in the morning, to ask after her welfare," Hal said offhandedly, and passed John a glass. "Here. Hang on to it this time. You look as though you need it."

He did, and drank off the sherry—which wasn't bad—in a couple of gulps.

"She didn't ... actually give you her address, did she?" he asked, and cleared his throat, trying not to glance at the hearth rug. It had been there for years and years, a very worn small carpet with the family crest woven into it, much pocked with burn marks and the edge of it scorched. He thought it had been a wedding present from Hal's first wife, Esmé, to her husband.

Hal laughed.

"No, of course not. Neither did she tell it to the coachman—persuaded him to let her out at Kettrick's Eel-Pye House, then legged it down the alley and disappeared. Took me nearly six months to find her."

Hal disposed of his own sherry with dispatch, then plucked the questionable sheet off the desk again.

"Let me show her this. She's not had much opportunity to practice of late, but she might be able at least to tell us if it is encoded."

Left alone with the decanter and the hearth rug, Grey poured another drink and went back to the balcony. The garden was quiet now; the sky had clouded over and the boys had gone in for their tea—he could hear them rumpusing in the nursery overhead. Dottie and her nurse were both sound asleep on the grass by the fish pool, Dottie's gown still firmly in the nurse's grasp.

He wasn't quite sure whether Hal's story had shocked him or not. Hal made his own rules; John had long been aware of that. And if he'd temporarily had the upper hand of Minerva Wattiswade, he'd long since lost it—Hal himself knew that.

He glanced up at the ceiling, the recipient of a loud crash as a chair was overturned, shrill voices rising in the aftermath. How old was his nephew Benjamin? He glanced at the hearth rug. He'd been abroad when Benjamin was born, but his mother had written to apprise him of the event —he remembered reading the letter in a tent, with rain pattering on the canvas overhead. He'd lost three men the day before and was suffering some depression of spirit; news of the child's birth had comforted him.

He imagined it had comforted Hal, too. Grey had learned—recently, and quite by accident—that Hal's first wife, Esmé, who had died in childbirth and the child with her, had been seduced by one of Hal's friends, Nathaniel Twelvetrees, and that Hal had subsequently killed Twelvetrees in a duel. He thought that his brother had likely been quite insane at the time. How long after that had he met Minnie?

A flash of white showed at the door of the conservatory, on the far side of the garden. Minnie herself, and he drew back instinctively, though she couldn't see him. She looked up calculatingly at the sky, then glanced at the house. It wasn't raining yet, though, and she went back into the conservatory. A moment later, Hal appeared from the kitchen door and went in after her, paper in hand.

He was deeply startled at what Hal had told him—but not, on consideration, all that surprised that Hal had told him. His brother was secretive and self-controlled to a fault, but a tight-closed kettle will spurt steam when it reaches the

boiling point. To Grey's knowledge, Hal had only three people in whom he would confide—his own mother not being among them.

The three were Grey himself, Harry Quarry—one of the regimental colonels—and Minnie.

So what, he wondered, was presently boiling under Hal? Something to do with Minnie? But Grey had spoken to her when he came in, and she'd given no indication that anything was wrong.

A spatter of rain on the window and shrieks from below made him look; a sudden shower had floated over the garden, and the nursemaid was dashing for the house, Dottie crowing in delight at the raindrops and waving her arms. He put his head out, to feel the rain himself, and smiled at the fragrant freshness of the air and the splash of rain on his skin. He closed his eyes, abandoning all thought, speculation, and worry in the momentary pleasure of breathing.

"What the devil are you doing, John?"

He withdrew his head reluctantly, drew the window to, and blinked water from his lashes. Hal was staring at him in disapproval, page in hand. There was a dark pink camellia in his buttonhole, leaning drunkenly.

"Enjoying the rain." He wiped a hand over his face and shook himself a little; his hair was damp, as was his collar and the shoulders of his coat. "Was Minnie able to be of help?"

"Yes." Hal sounded surprised at the admission. "She says it's neither a code nor a cipher."

"That's helpful? What is it, if it's neither code nor cipher?" "She says it's Erse."



Erse. The word gave Grey a very odd sensation. Erse was what folk spoke in the Scottish Highlands. It sounded like no

other language he'd ever heard—and, barbarous as it was, he was rather surprised to learn that it existed in a written form.

Hal was looking at him speculatively. "You must have heard it fairly often, at Ardsmuir?"

"Heard it, yes. Almost all the prisoners spoke it." Grey had been governor of Ardsmuir prison for a brief period; as much exile as appointment, in the wake of a near scandal. He disliked thinking about that period of his life, for assorted reasons.

"Did Fraser speak it?"

Oh, God, Grey thought. Not that. Anything but that.

"Yes," he said, though. He had often overheard James Fraser speaking in his native tongue to the other prisoners, the words mysterious and flowing.

"When did you see him last?"

"Not for some time." Grey spoke briefly, his voice careful. He hadn't spoken to the man in more than a year.

Not careful enough; Hal came round in front of him, examining him at close range, as though he might be an unusual sort of Chinese jug.

"He is still at Helwater, is he not? Will you go and ask him about Siverly?" Hal said mildly.

"No."

"No?"

"I would not piss on him was he burning in the flames of hell," Grey said politely.

One of Hal's brows flicked upward, but only momentarily.

"Just so," he said dryly. "The question, though, is whether Fraser might be inclined to perform a similar service for you."

Grey placed his cup carefully in the center of the desk.

"Only if he thought I might drown," he said, and went out.



An Irishman, a Gentleman

Helwater April 2

Jamie dressed and went down to fork hay for the horses, disregarding the dark and the chill in his hands and feet as he worked. *An Irishman. A gentleman*.

Who the devil could that be? And—if the Irishman existed —what had he to do with Betty? He kent some Irishmen. Such Irish gentlemen as he knew, though, were Jacobites, who'd come to Scotland with Charles Stuart. That thought froze what small parts of him weren't chilled already.

The Jacobite Cause was dead, and so was the part of his life connected with it.

Have sense, though. What would such a man want with him? He was a paroled prisoner of war, held in menial servitude, not even allowed to use his own notorious name. He was no better than a black slave, save that he couldn't be sold and no one beat him. He occasionally wished that someone would try, to give him the excuse of violence, but he recognized the desire as idle fantasy and pushed the thought aside.

Beyond that ... how did anyone, Jacobite, Irishman, or Hottentot, know where he was? He'd had a letter from his sister in the Highlands only a week before, and she'd certainly have mentioned anyone inquiring after him, let alone an Irishman.

The air of the stable was changing, gray light seeping in through the chinks of the walls. The dark was growing thin and with it the nightly illusion of space and freedom, as the grimy boards of his prison faded into view.

At the end of the row, he put down his pitchfork and, with a hasty glance over his shoulder to be sure neither Hanks nor Crusoe had come down yet, he ducked into the empty loose box.

He let out his breath slow, as he would when hunting, and drew it in again slower, nostrils flaring to catch a scent. Nothing but the dry smell of last August's hay in the stall; behind him, the tang of fresh manure and the sweetness of mash and horses' breath. The hay was tumbled, trampled in spots. He could see where he had lain last night—and a slow flush rose in his cheeks—and another spot, perhaps, where someone might have stood, in the far corner.

Little wonder the man hadn't spoken to him, in the circumstances. He coughed. *If* he'd been there, and Jamie rather hoped he hadn't.

Irishman. An Irish gentleman. The only connection he could think of ... His fists curled tight as the thought came to him, and he felt the echo of impact in the bones of his knuckles. Lord John Grey. He'd found an Irishman—or the hint of one —for John Grey, but surely this could have nothing to do with Grey's matter.

He hadn't seen Grey in over a year and, with luck, might never see him again. Grey had been governor of Ardsmuir prison during Jamie's imprisonment there and had arranged his parole at Helwater, the Dunsany family being longtime friends. Grey had been in the habit of visiting quarterly to inspect his prisoner, and their relations had gradually become civil, if no more.

Then Grey had offered him a bargain: if Jamie would write

letters making inquiries among those Jacobites he knew living abroad regarding a matter of interest to Grey, Lord John would instruct Lord Dunsany to allow Jamie also to write openly to his family in the Highlands and to receive letters from them. Jamie had accepted this bargain, had made the desired inquiries, and had received certain information, carefully worded, that indicated that the man Lord John sought might be an Irish Jacobite—one of those followers of the Stuarts who had called themselves Wild Geese.

He didn't know what use—if any—Grey had made of the information. Things had been said at their last meeting that —He choked the memory of it off and picked up his fork, driving it into the pile of hay with some force. Whoever Betty's Irishman might be, he could have nothing to do with John Grey.



With the usual vagaries of spring, the day had not so much dawned as it had merely stopped being night. Fog lay on the fells above Helwater in huge dirty banks, and the cold sky was the color of lead. Jamie's right hand ached. It had been broken once in a dozen places, and every one of them now informed him in a piercing whinge that it was going to rain.

Not that he needed telling; the steel-gray light aside, he could feel the heavy damp in his lungs and his sweat chilled on him, never drying. He worked like an automaton, his mind in two places, and neither of those where his body was.

Part of his thoughts dwelled on Betty. He needed to talk with that wee besom, preferably in a place where she couldn't get away from him easily.

The lady's maids usually took their meals with the housekeeper in her sitting room, rather than joining the lower servants in the kitchen. He couldn't go beyond the

kitchen into the house—not openly. He paused for an instant, hayfork in hand, to wonder just what would happen if he entered surreptitiously and was caught? What could Lord Dunsany do to him? He couldn't be dismissed, after all.

That ludicrous thought made him laugh, and he went back to his work and his thinking in a better humor.

Well, there was church. The Dunsanys were Anglican and usually attended St. Margaret's, the village church in Ellesmere. They traveled by coach, and Betty normally went with Lady Dunsany and Lady Isobel, her mistress. He was under parole as a prisoner of war; he couldn't set foot off the estate at Helwater without leave from Lord Dunsany—but the big coach required a team of four, which meant two drivers, and Jamie was the only groom who could drive more than a gig.

Aye, that might work; he'd see. If he could get within reach of Betty, he could perhaps slip her a note that would bring her out to talk to him. God knew what he'd say, but he'd think of something.

He could of course entrust such a note to one of the kitchen maids when he had his breakfast, but the fewer people who had to do with this business, the better. He'd try it alone first.

That much tentatively decided, he stopped to wipe his face with the grubby towel that hung on a hook over the bran tub and turned his mind again toward Betty's Irish gentleman.

Did he exist at all? If he did, what the devil did he want with Alex MacKenzie? Unless, of course, it *wasn't* Alex MacKenzie but instead Jamie Fraser whom he—

This embryonic train of thought was severed by a skittering thud and the appearance of Hanks at the foot of the ladder, yellow-jowled and smelling rancid.

"Here, Mac," he said, trying to sound jovial. "Do me a favor?"

"Aye. What?"

Hanks managed a ghastly half smile.

"Doncher want to know what it is?"

"No." What he wanted was for Hanks to leave, and now. The man stank as though he were dead inside, and the horses near him were whuffling and snorting in disgust.

"Oh." Hanks rubbed a trembling hand over his face. "'S not much. Just ... can you take my string out? I'm not ..." The hand fell limp in sweeping illustration of all the things that Hanks was not.

A gust of wind came in cold beneath the stable door, smelling of the coming rain, whirling chaff and straw along the bricks between the boxes. He hesitated. It would be pouring within the hour. He could feel the storm brooding up there on the fells, dark with its gathering.

Rain wouldn't trouble the horses; they loved it. And the fog would go when the rain fell; no great danger of getting lost.

"Meet him on the fells," Betty had said. "Where the old shepherd's hut is."

"Aye, fine." He turned his back and began to measure out the bran and flaxseed for the mash. After a moment, he heard Hanks stumble toward the ladder and he half-turned, watching in idle curiosity to see whether the man might fall and break his neck. He didn't, though.

April 3

In the event, it had rained too hard to get high up on the fells. Jamie had taken his string of horses pounding through the mud of the lakeshore road, then walked them through the shallows of Glassmere to get the worst of it off, then back to be rubbed down and dried. He'd glanced up toward the fells once, but the rain hid the heights where the ruins of the old shepherd's hut lay.

It was cold on the fells today but bright, and he had no string to fash with. Augustus's coat steamed from the effort of the climb, and Jamie reined up at the crest of the rocky path to reconnoiter and to let the horse breathe. This high up, the landscape was still patched with winter, rags of frozen snow in the lee of the rocks and dripping icicles still hanging under ledges, but he felt the sun's warmth on his shoulders and there was a faint haze of green over White Moss, just visible in the distance below.

He'd come up this way, approaching the ruined shepherd's cottage from behind and above, to give himself an opportunity to look things over. There was no reason to suspect ambush or trap, but instinct had kept him alive so far and he seldom ignored its grim mutterings in his ear.

He'd not been up here in months, but very little changed on the fells, save the weather. There was a small tarn below, rimmed with a crescent of thin ice, last year's dry reeds poking black through it, not yet supplanted by new growth. The shepherd's hut was just beyond the tarn. So ruined was it that from the water's level you'd never see it, taking it for no more than another heap of lichened stones. From above, though, the square foundation was clearly visible—and, in one corner, something flapped in the wind. Canvas, maybe? There was a bundle of some kind there, he was almost sure.

Nothing moved below save the flapping canvas and the wind in the last of winter's grass. He slid off Augustus and hobbled him, leaving the gelding to nose among the rocks for what might be found there. He walked a short way along the ridge for a better view and, emerging from behind a jutting outcrop, saw the man sitting on a rock, thirty feet below him, also watching the ruined hut.

He was thin; Jamie could see the bones of his shoulders stark under his coat. He wore a slouched hat, but as Jamie watched him, he removed this to scratch his scalp, revealing a head of brown curls streaked with gray. He seemed familiar, and Jamie was racking his memory in search of the man's name when his foot dislodged a small rock. It made a tiny sound, but enough. The man turned and stood up, thin face lighting. He'd lost an eyetooth, Jamie saw, but it didn't impair the charm of his smile.

"Well, and is it not Himself? Well met, Jamie dear, well met!"

"Quinn?" he said, disbelieving. "Is it you?"

The Irishman glanced quizzically down at his body, patted his chest, and looked up again.

"Well, what's left of me. There's none of us is all we once were, after all—though I must say ye're lookin' well in yourself." He looked Jamie up and down with approval. "The air up here must agree with ye. And ye've filled out a bit since last I saw ye."

"I daresay," Jamie replied, rather dryly. When last he'd seen Tobias Quinn, in 1746, he had been twenty-five and starving along with the rest of the Jacobite army. Quinn was a year younger than himself, and Jamie saw the lines in the Irishman's face and the gray in his hair with a sense of dismay. If Quinn felt any similar emotion at sight of Jamie, he kept it to himself.

"Ye might have told Betty your name," Jamie said, making his way down. He held out a hand to the Irishman, but Quinn stood and flung his arms round Jamie, embracing him. Jamie was startled and embarrassed to feel tears come to his eyes at the touch, and he hugged Quinn tight for a minute, to blink them back.

"She knows my name. But I wasn't sure ye'd come, if ye knew 'twas me." Quinn stood back, brushed an unashamed knuckle under his own eyes, and laughed. "By the Blessed Mother, Jamie, it's glad I am to see ye!"

"And I you." That much was true; Jamie left alone the question of whether he would have come, knowing it was Quinn who waited on the fells. He sat down slowly on a

rock, to gain a moment.

It wasn't that he disliked the man; quite the opposite. But to see this bit of the past rise up before him like a ghost from blood-soaked ground roused feelings he'd gone to great trouble to bury—and memories were stirring that he didn't want back. Beyond that ... instinct had given over muttering in his ear and was talking plain and clear. Quinn had been one of Charles Stuart's intimates, but never a soldier. He'd fled to France after Culloden, or so Jamie had heard. What the devil was he doing here now?

"Ah, sure that Betty's a fine girl, and her with those snapping black eyes," Quinn was saying. He eyed Jamie, head on one side. "She's a bit of a fondness for *you*, my lad, I can tell."

Jamie repressed the urge to cross himself at the thought.

"Ye've a clear field there," he assured Quinn. "Dinna fash yourself that I'd queer your pitch."

Quinn blinked at him, and it struck him of a sudden that "queer your pitch" was one of Claire's expressions; maybe it was not merely English but from her own time?

Whether Quinn was puzzled or not, though, he plainly took Jamie's meaning.

"Well, I might, too—save that Betty's me late wife's sister. I'm sure there's a thing or two in the Bible about not doing the deed with your late wife's sister."

Jamie had read the Bible cover to cover several times—from necessity, it being his only book at the time—and recalled no such proscription, but he merely said, "I'm sorry to hear about your wife, man. Was it lang since that she died?"

Quinn pursed his lips and tilted his head from side to side.

"Well, when I say 'late,' I don't mean necessarily that the woman's *deceased*, if ye take my meaning."

Jamie raised one brow, and Quinn sighed.

"When it all went to smash after Culloden, and I had to

scarper to France, she took a hard look at my future prospects, so to speak, and decided her fortunes lay elsewhere. My Tess always did have a sound head on her shoulders," he said, shaking his own head in admiration. "She was in Leeds, the last I heard. Inherited a tavern from her last husband. Well, by 'last,' mind, I mean the latest one, because I don't for a moment think she means to stop."

"Oh, aye?"

"But that's what I wanted to speak with ye about, conveniently enough," Quinn went on, waving an airy hand in dismissal of the erstwhile Tess.

"About Leeds? Or taverns?" Jamie prayed that the man didn't mean wives. He'd not mentioned Claire to anyone in several years and would rather have his toenails pulled out with horse-nail pliers than be forced to talk about her.

"Culloden," Quinn said, causing equal amounts of relief and dismay in the bosom of his hearer. Culloden came about fourth on Jamie's list of things he didn't want to talk about, preceded only by his wife, Claire; his son, William; and Jack Randall.

Jamie got off the rock, feeling obscurely that he'd rather be on his feet just now, though not knowing whether it was needing to feel ready to meet whatever was coming or an incipient urge to flee. Either way, he felt better standing.

"Or rather," Quinn amended, "not Culloden so much as the Cause, if ye take my meaning."

"I should think the two are much the same," Jamie said, not trying to keep the edge out of his voice. "Dead."

"Ah, well, now there ye're wrong," Quinn said, waggling a bony finger at him. "Though of course ye'll have been out of touch."

"I have, aye."

Quinn continued to ignore the edge.

"The Cause may have suffered some reverses in Scotland

"Reverses!" Jamie exclaimed. "Ye call what happened at Drumossie *reverses*?"

"—but it's alive and thrivin' in Ireland."

Jamie stared at him for a moment of blank incomprehension, then realized what he was saying.

"Jesus!"

"Ah, thought that would gladden yer heart, lad," said Quinn, choosing to interpret Jamie's cry as one of hallelujah rather than horror. He smiled, the tip of his tongue poking briefly through the hole left by his missing eyetooth.

"There's a group of us, see. Did Betty not pass on what I said about the green branch?"

"She did, aye, but I didna ken what she meant by it."

Quinn waved a hand, dismissing this.

"Well, it took some time to pull things together after Culloden, but it's all moving a treat now. I'll not give the details just yet, if ye don't mind—"

"I dinna mind a bit."

"—but I *will* say that there's an invasion planned, maybe as soon as next year—ha-ha! Would ye look at your face now? Flabbergasted, aye? Well, I was, too, first I heard of it. But there's more!"

"Oh, God."

Quinn leaned forward conspiratorially, lowering his voice—though there was no one near enough to hear save a soaring peregrine overhead.

"And this is where you come into it."

"Me?!" Jamie had begun to sink back onto his rock, but this brought him up all standing at once. "Are ye mad?"

He hadn't meant it as a rhetorical question, but neither did he expect an affirmative answer, and it was just as well, because he didn't get one.

"Have ye ever heard"—and here Quinn paused to dart his eyes one way and then the other, looking out for invisible watchers—"of the *Cupán Druid riogh*?"

"I have not. A cup ...?"

"The cup o' the Druid king, the very thing!"

Jamie rubbed a hand over his face, feeling very tired. "Quinn, I'm pleased to see ye well, but I've work to do and ___"

"Oh, indeed ye have, lad!" Quinn reached out and fastened an earnest hand to Jamie's forearm. "Let me explain."

He didn't wait for permission.

"It's the ancient possession o' the kings of Ireland, the *Cupán* is. Given to the king of kings by the chief Druid himself, so far back folk have forgotten the time of it."

"Oh, aye?"

"But the people know it still; it's spoken of in the legends, and 'tis a powerful symbol of kingship." The hand on Jamie's forearm tightened. "Think, now. How would it be, Prince *Tearlach* riding into Dublin, standin' in the courtyard o' Dublin Castle, between the Gates of Fortitude and Justice, with the *Cupán* raised high as he claims all of Ireland for his father?"

"Well, since ye ask ..."

"Why, man, the people would rise from the *bailes* and the bogs in their thousands! We should take England with scarce a shot fired, there'd be so many!"

"Ye have *seen* the English army ..." Jamie began, but he might as well have tried to stop the tide coming into the River Ness.

"And that's where *you* come in!" Quinn let go of his arm at last, but only in order to prod him enthusiastically in the chest.

Jamie recoiled slightly. "Me?"

"See, the thing is, we've found the *Cupán*—lost for two hundred years it's been, and legends saying the faeries took it, the Druids reclaimed it, all manner of tosh, but we—well, I myself, in fact"—here he tried to look modest, with indifferent results—"discovered it, in the hands of the monks

at the monastery of Inchcleraun."

"B11t—"

"Now, the monks are keepin' the precious thing close and quiet, to be sure. But the thing is, the abbot at Inchcleraun is one Michael FitzGibbons." He stood back a bit, looking expectant.

Jamie raised the brow again. Quinn sighed at such obtuseness but obliged with more information.

"Mi-chael Fitz-Gib-bons," he repeated, prodding Jamie's chest anew with each syllable. Jamie moved back out of reach.

"FitzGibbons," Quinn repeated, "and the man first cousin to your godfather, Murtagh FitzGibbons Fraser, is he not? To say nothing of having grown up in the house of your uncle Alexander Fraser, and the two of them thick as thieves? Though perhaps that's not quite the figure of speech to be using for a pair of priests, but what I mean to say is, they might be brothers, so close as they are, and the two writing back and forth from month to month. So—"

Finally, Quinn was obliged to draw breath, giving Jamie the chance to stick a word in edgewise.

"No," he said definitely. "Not for all the tea in China."

Quinn's long face creased in puzzlement. "China? What's China got to do with it, for all love?"

Ah. Another of Claire's sayings, then. He tried again. "I mean I will not try to persuade my uncle Alexander to pry this thing out of FitzGibbons's hands."

"Oh, no, that's not what I had in mind, at all."

"Good, because—"

"I want ye to go to Inchcleraun yourself. Oh, now, there's that look on your face again!" Quinn laughed in amusement, rocking back, then planted his hands on his knees and leaned forward.

Jamie leaned forward, too, to forestall him.

"Quinn, I'm a prisoner of war. I've given my parole. Surely

to goodness Betty told ye as much?"

"Sure and I didn't think ye were here for your health," Quinn said, with a glance round at the bleak fells and the desolate ruins of the shepherd's hut. "But that's of no moment."

"It's not?"

Quinn waved this aside as a mere quibble.

"No. It's got to be someone Father Michael trusts and at the same time someone known to be at the right hand o' the Stuarts, who can swear that the *Cupán* won't be misused but put to its right and sacred purpose in restoring a Catholic monarch to the throne of Ireland. *And* a man who can raise and lead an army. People trust you, ye know," he said earnestly, tilting his head up and examining Jamie's face. "They listen when ye speak, and men will follow ye without question. It's known of ye."

"No longer," Jamie said, and found he was clenching his fists; his throat was dried by the wind, so the words came hoarse. "No. No longer."

Quinn's fizzy manner had calmed somewhat. He clasped Jamie's hand in both his own.

"Man, dear," he said, almost gently. "Kings have their destiny about them—but so do those who serve them. This is yours. God's chosen ye for the task."

Jamie closed his eyes briefly, drew a deep breath, and pulled his hand free.

"I think God had best look elsewhere, Quinn," he said. "The blessing of Bride and Michael be on you. Goodbye."

He turned and walked away, finding Augustus where he'd been left, peacefully cropping the tufts of wiry grass that grew between the rocks. He removed the hobbles, swung up into the saddle, and turned the horse's head toward the trail. He hadn't meant to look back but at the last minute glanced down toward the shepherd's hut.

Quinn stood there in dark silhouette against the late-

afternoon sun, a stick-jointed marionette with a nimbus of curls. He lifted a long-fingered hand and waved in farewell.

"See ye in Dublin town!" he called. "Stuart *go bragh*!" and his merry laugh followed Jamie down the steep track toward Helwater.



He rode down from the fells, prey to an unsettling mix of emotions. Incredulity and impatience at Quinn's fat-heided scheme, a weary dismay at the realization that the Jacobite Cause was still alive, if only faintly squirming, and irritation at Quinn's attempt to inveigle him back into it. More than a bit of fear, if he was honest. And notwithstanding all that ... joy at seeing Quinn again. It had been a long time since he'd seen the face of a friend.

"Bloody Irishman," he muttered, but smiled nonetheless.

Would Quinn go away now? he wondered. The Irishman was as bullet-headed as most of his race and not likely to give up his scheme only because Jamie refused to help him with it. But he might well go and have a try at some other feckless candidate. Half of Jamie hoped to God that was the case. The other half wouldn't mind talking to the man again, hearing what news he had about the others who'd left Culloden alive.

The muscle of his leg contracted suddenly, and a chill shivered over his skin as though a ghost paced by his stirrup. Augustus snorted, sensing his tension.

He clicked his tongue in reassurance, letting the horse pick his own way through the tricky footing of the trail. His heart was racing, and he tried to breathe deep and slow to calm it. Damn Quinn for bringing it back. He'd dream tonight, and a mixed feeling of dread and hope rose in him at the knowledge. Whose face would he see?



Much to his annoyance, he dreamed of Charles Stuart. Drunk as usual, amiable as always, the prince reeled down a dark street somewhere at Jamie's side, poking him now and then, blethering of this and that, grabbing his arm and giggling as he pointed out a row of heads mounted on spikes along a wall.

"Coimhead," the man kept saying. "A Dhia coimhead am fear ud' seall an dealbh a th'air aodann!" Look at that one, God, the look on its face.

"What are ye about?" Jamie demanded irritably. "Ye ken ye havena got the *Gàidhlig*."

"Bheil e gu diofair," replied Prince Tearlach. Does it matter? Quinn, who had suddenly appeared from somewhere, seized Jamie's arm with great strength, compelling him to stop.

"Coimhead nach ann oirre tha a ghruag aluinn?" Look—does she not have lovely hair?

Jamie had been trying not to look but did now and, surprised, saw that all the heads were women's. He was holding a torch and raised it to see Geneva Dunsany's face looking back at him, pale and composed, with black and empty eye sockets. From the corner of his eye, he could see that the next head had a wealth of curling light-brown hair; he dashed the torch onto the wet cobbles at his feet in order not to see and woke, heart pounding, to the sound of Charles's drunken laughter.

It wasn't, though. It was Hanks, laughing in his sleep, the sharp smell of beer and urine hanging in a cloud over his pallet; he'd pissed himself again. The moon was up, and the mice who lived in the loft were stirring; moonlight always made them venturesome. Hanks subsided into heavy breathing and Jamie could hear the tiny scratch of nails on the floor, the rustle of straw.

He threw back his blanket, determined not to go to sleep again until the dream had faded. But it had been a long day, and in spite of the cold, he dozed again.

Sleeping cold always gave him bad dreams. The new one had to do with Betty, and he woke from that in a cold sweat. Fumbling in the box that held his possessions, he found his rosary and sank back into the matted straw of his pallet, clinging to the wooden beads as though to a raft that might keep him afloat.



Not Good

Regimental Offices of the 46th Foot London

Mr. Beasley was disturbed about something. The age of Hal's regimental clerk was an unknowable secret; he had looked just the same—ancient—ever since John Grey had first set eyes on him, a quarter century before. But those who knew him well could detect small fluctuations in his gray, peering countenance in times of stress, and Grey was seeing more and more of these subtle tremors of the jaw, the subterranean quiverings of eyelid, as Mr. Beasley turned over the pages of Charles Carruthers's combustible packet with tidy, ink-stained fingers.

The elderly clerk was supposed to be making a list of the men indicted in the documents, those men whom Carruthers had known or suspected to have had dealings, financial or otherwise, with Major Gerald Siverly. Grey was supposed to be joining Hal and Harry Quarry—one of the regimental colonels and Hal's oldest friend—for a discussion of strategy, but neither one had arrived yet, and Grey had wandered into Mr. Beasley's clerk's hole to borrow a book; the old man had a remarkable collection of French novels squirreled discreetly away in one of his cabinets.

Grey took down a copy of Abbé Prévost's Manon Lescaut,

and thumbed casually through the pages, watching Beasley covertly as he did so. He knew better than to ask; Mr. Beasley was the soul of discretion, that being only one of the attributes that made him invaluable to Hal, as he had been to the first earl of Melton, their father and the founder of the regiment.

The disturbance was growing worse. Mr. Beasley made to dip his pen but instead allowed it to hover above the inkstand and then slowly set it down. He had turned over a page; now he turned it back and studied something upon it, thin lips compressed almost into invisibility.

"Lord John," he said at last, and removed his spectacles to blink nearsightedly up at Grey.

"Yes, Mr. Beasley." He put down *Manon Lescaut* at once and looked expectant.

"You have read these documents, I collect?"

"I have," Grey said cautiously. "Perhaps not with the greatest attention to detail, but ..."

"And His Grace has read them. What—if I may inquire—was his state of mind upon reading them?"

Grey considered. "Well, he didn't break anything. He swore quite a bit in German, though."

"Ah." Mr. Beasley appreciated the significance of this point. He tapped spatulate fingertips upon his desk; he *was* perturbed. "Do you—would you describe him as having flown into a horrid passion?"

"I would," Grey said promptly.

"But he did not mention anything ... specific ... with regard to these documents?" He glanced at the neat stack beside him.

"No ..." Grey said slowly. Hal had certainly noted the Erse poem, if that's what it was, but that sheet had not been given to Mr. Beasley; that couldn't be what was disturbing the elderly clerk. He risked a question. "Have you noticed something?"

Mr. Beasley grimaced and turned the sheet around, facing Grey.

"There," he said, placing a precise finger in the middle of the page. "Read that list of Major Siverly's known associates, if you would be so kind."

Grey obligingly sat down and bent his head over the sheet. Three seconds later his head snapped up and he stared at the clerk. "Jesus!"

"Yes," said Mr. Beasley mildly. "I thought that, too. You don't think he's seen it?"

"I'm sure he hasn't."

They stared at each other for a moment, hearing the sound of footsteps coming down the corridor. Grey swallowed.

"Let me do it," he said, and, taking the sheet, folded it hastily into his pocket, then rose to greet his brother.



Hal had a carriage waiting outside.

"We're meeting Harry at Almack's," he said.

"What for? He's not a member there, is he?" Harry was a clubbable man, but he was largely to be found at White's Chocolate House, Hal's own particular haunt in terms of coffeehouses, or at the Society for the Appreciation of the English Beefsteak, which was Grey's favorite—a gentlemen's club rather than a coffeehouse. There were occasional clashes between the patrons of White's and those of Boodle's or Almack's; London coffeehouses inspired considerable loyalty.

"He's not," Hal said tersely. "But Bartholomew Halloran is."

"And Bartholomew Halloran is ...?"

"The adjutant of the Thirty-fifth."

"Ah. And thus a source of information on Major Gerald Siverly, also of that regiment."

"Quite. He's a casual acquaintance of Harry's; they play cards now and then."

"I hope Harry's wily enough to lose convincingly." The carriage hit a pothole and lurched, flinging them heavily to the side. Hal saved himself by thrusting a foot hard into the opposite seat, between his brother's legs. John, with equally good reflexes, grabbed the foot.

The coach swayed precariously for an instant but then righted itself, and they resumed their original positions.

"We should have walked," Hal said, and made to stick his head out the window to call to the coachman. Grey seized him by the sleeve, though, and he looked at his brother in surprise.

"No. Just—no. Wait."

Hal stared at him for a moment, but then lowered himself back to the seat.

"What is it?" he said. He looked wary but keen.

"This," said Grey simply, and, reaching into his pocket, handed over the folded sheet. "Read the list of names in the middle."

Hal took the sheet, frowning, and began to read. Grey counted in his head. Hal didn't read quite as fast as he did.

Five ... four ... three ... two ... one ...

"Jesus!"

"Well, yes."

They looked at each other in silence for the length of several heartbeats.

"Of *all* the men Siverly could have had dealings with—" Hal said, and shook his head violently, like a man trying to rid himself of flies.

"It has to be, of course," Grey said. "I mean, there aren't two of them, surely."

"Would that there were. But I doubt it. Edward Twelvetrees is not that common a name."

"Once upon a time, there were three brothers," Grey said,

half under his breath. Hal had closed his eyes and was breathing heavily. "Reginald, Nathaniel ... and Edward."

Hal opened his eyes. "It's always the youngest who gets the princess, isn't it?" He gave John a lopsided smile. "Younger brothers are the very devil."



At this hour of the morning, Almack's public rooms were bustling. Harry Quarry was chatting amiably with a thin, worried-looking man whom Grey recognized as a stockbroker. On seeing them, Harry took his leave with a word and stood up, coming to meet them.

"I've bespoke a private cardroom," Harry said, shaking hands with Grey and nodding to Hal. "Symington, Clifford, and Bingham will be joining us shortly."

Grey nodded cordially, wondering what on earth Harry was about, but Hal gave no sign of surprise.

"Didn't want it to get about that inquiries were being made," Harry explained, peering out in the larger room before shutting the door to the cardroom. "We'll have a few minutes to talk, then, once the others have come, we'll have a few hands of picquet, you lot leave for another engagement, and I'll stay on. No one will notice you've even been here."

Harry looked so pleased at this stratagem for deflecting suspicion that Grey hadn't the heart to point out that Harry might simply have come to Argus House to share whatever news he'd gained from Halloran. Hal didn't look at John but nodded gravely at Harry.

"Very clever," he said. "But if we've not much time—"

He was interrupted by a servant bringing in a tray of coffee dishes, a plate of biscuits, and several decks of cards, already separated into the *talons* required for picquet.

"If we've not much time," Hal repeated, with an edge in

his voice, once the servant had departed, "perhaps you'd best tell us what Halloran had to say."

"A fair amount," Harry said, sitting down. "Coffee?"

Harry's bluff, craggy face inspired confidence in men and a remarkable degree of sensual abandonment in women, which Grey considered one of the great mysteries of nature. On the other hand, he didn't presume to know what women thought attractive. In the present instance, though, Adjutant Halloran appeared to have been taken in by Harry's casual charm as easily as any society lady.

"Lot of talk, regimental gossip," Harry said, dismissing all of this with a wave of one broad hand. He spilled coffee into his saucer and blew on it, making wisps of aromatic steam rise from the dark brew. "Got him round to Siverly eventually, though. He respects Siverly, doesn't much like him. Reputation as a good soldier, good commander. Doesn't waste men.... What?"

Both the Greys had made noises. Hal waved a hand at Harry.

"Tell you later. Go on. Did he say anything about the mutiny in Canada?"

"No." Harry arched a brow. "But he wouldn't, would he? It wasn't brought to a general court-martial, and if it was a regimental affair ..."

Grey nodded; regimental courts-martial were usually kept private, no regiment wanting to wash its dirty linen in public. For that matter, the public wouldn't be interested in such affairs, which dealt with the daily crimes and trespasses of common soldiers, for the most part: drunkenness, theft, fighting, insubordination, lying out of barracks without leave, and selling their uniforms. General courts-martial were different, though Grey was unsure of just what the differences were, having never been involved in one. He thought there had to be a judge advocate involved.

"He hasn't been brought before a general court-martial

yet," Hal said grimly.

Harry's eyes narrowed, lips pursed as he sipped his coffee. It smelled good, and Grey reached for the pot.

"Really?" Harry said. "That's what we have in mind, is it?" Hal had informed Harry, by note, of their interest in Siverly, asking him to find out what he could of the man's particulars—but knowing Hal's way with letters, Grey thought there had probably not been much detail given.

"Certainly," Hal said. "So, what else?" He picked up one of the biscuits and examined it critically before popping it into his mouth.

"Siverly's not wildly popular in the regiment, but not disliked," Harry said. "Sociable, but not active. Invited in society, accepts occasionally. Has a wife, but doesn't live with her. She brought him some money, not a great deal, but no great connections."

"Has he any of his own?" Grey asked, mouth half full. The biscuits were ginger-nuts, and fresh, still warm from the kitchen. "Any family?"

"Ah," said Harry, and glanced briefly at Hal. "No family connections to speak of. Father was a captain in the Eleventh Dragoons, killed at Culloden. Mother was the daughter of a wealthy Irish family, but from the country, no influence."

"But?" Hal said sharply, having caught the glance. "He has important friends?"

Harry took a breath that swelled his waistcoat and leaned back.

"Oh, yes," he said. "The Duke of Cumberland important enough for you?"

"He'll do to be going on with," Hal said, brows raised. "What's the connection there?"

"Hunting. Siverly has an estate in Ireland and has entertained His Grace there on occasion. Together with a few of the duke's intimates."

"An estate? Inherited?" Grey asked.

"No, bought. Fairly recently."

Hal made a low humming noise that indicated satisfaction. Obviously Siverly hadn't bought a large estate, even in Ireland, on his pay. From Carruthers's accounts, Siverly's ventures in Canada had netted him something in excess of thirty thousand pounds.

"Very good," he said. "That would impress the board of a court-martial."

"Well, it might," Harry said, flicking crumbs off his stomach. "If you can get him in front of one."

"If necessary, I'll have him arrested and dragged there by force."

Harry made a hmmphing noise, one implying doubt, which made Hal give him a narrow look.

"You don't think I'd do it? This blackguard disgraces the name of his profession, as well as damaging the whole army by his gross behavior. Besides," he added, as an afterthought, "John's bound to see justice done, by his word of honor."

"Oh, I think you'd do it," Harry assured him. "And so would Grey. It's just that Siverly's in Ireland. Might complicate matters, eh?"

"Oh," said Hal, looking rather blank.

"Why?" asked Grey, stopped in the act of pouring more coffee. "What's he doing there?"

"Damned if I know. All Halloran said was that Siverly had asked for—and been granted—six months' leave to attend to personal matters."

"He didn't resign his commission, though?" Grey leaned forward, anxious. He wasn't sure but thought a court-martial couldn't try someone who was not in the army. And going after Siverly in the civil courts would be a much more laborious undertaking.

Harry shrugged. "Don't think so. Halloran only said he'd taken leave."

"Well, then." Hal put down his dish in a decided manner

and turned to his brother. "You'll just have to go to Ireland and bring him back."



The arrival of the picquet party put paid to further discussion, and Grey found himself paired with Leo Clifford, a pleasant young captain who had recently joined the regiment. Clifford was no particular hand at cards, though, which left a good bit of Grey's mind free to brood on the recent conversation.

"Go to Ireland and bring him back." He supposed he should be flattered that Hal trusted him to do such a thing, but he knew his brother well enough to know it was merely expectation and not compliment.

Could you court-martial someone *in absentia*? he wondered. He'd have to ask Minnie. She had ferreted out records of court-martial for the crime of sodomy when their stepbrother, Percy Wainwright, had been arrested. The army had shipped Percy back to England from Germany to stand trial, so perhaps you *couldn't* try someone not physically present.

"Repique," he said absently. Clifford sighed and wrote down the score.

He'd got over Percy. Or at least he thought so, most of the time. Every now and then, though, he'd catch sight of a slender young man with dark curly hair, and his heart would jerk.

It jerked now, a tiny bump at the sudden thought that it was the mention of Ireland, more than courts-martial, that had made him think of Percy. He'd arranged for Percy to escape to Ireland, though his erstwhile lover had made his way eventually to Rome. Surely he would have no reason to go back to Ireland ...?

"Sixième!" Clifford said, his voice full of joy. Grey smiled,

despite the loss of points, gave the proper reply of "Not good," meaning his own hand could not beat that, and put Percy firmly out of mind.

Harry had suggested that Grey and Hal might leave after the first game, but Grey was entirely aware that Harry knew this wouldn't happen. Hal was a cutthroat cardplayer, and once his blood was up, there was no dragging him away from the table. As picquet was a game for two hands, obviously Grey couldn't leave until Hal did, or the numbers would be unbalanced.

They therefore played in pairs, changing partners after each game, the two men with the highest scores to play the final game. Grey did his best to put everything out of his mind but the play. He succeeded to such an extent that he was startled when his brother—now opposing him—stiffened in his seat, head turning sharply toward the door.

There were voices raised in greeting in the outer room and the noise of several people coming in. In the midst of it, he caught the high, oddly prim voice of the Duke of Cumberland. He stared at Hal, who compressed his lips. Hal cordially disliked Cumberland—and vice versa—and the revelation that the duke was an intimate of Siverly's was unlikely to have improved this animus.

Hal's eye met his, and Grey knew what his brother was thinking: it would be necessary to proceed with the utmost secrecy. If Cumberland caught wind of the matter before the court-martial could be organized, he might well plant his fat arse right in the middle of it.

Then Grey caught the sound of another voice, deeper, gruff with age and tobacco, replying to something Cumberland had said.

"Scheisse!" Hal said, making everyone look at him curiously.

"Don't you say *carte blanche* if you have a hand with no points?" Clifford whispered, leaning over to Grey.

"Yes, you do," Grey replied, narrowing his eyes at Hal. He felt like saying something much worse himself, but it wouldn't do to attract attention. Harry, on the other side of the room, had heard that voice, too, and pursed his lips, eyes fixed on his cards.

Grey hadn't heard Reginald Twelvetrees's voice in some time, but he had vivid memories of it. Colonel Reginald Twelvetrees had headed a board of inquiry into the explosion of a cannon, two years before, and had come uncomfortably close to ruining Grey's career over it, out of the long-standing hostility that had existed between the Greys and the Twelvetrees family since Hal's duel with Nathaniel, the colonel's younger brother.

"When do you say scheisse?" Clifford whispered.

"When something untoward occurs," Grey whispered back, repressing an urge to laugh. "Septième," he said aloud to his brother.

"Not good," Hal growled, and tossed in his hand.



Why Am Not I at Peace?

Helwater

It hadn't been a good night. It wasn't going to be a good day.

Hanks and Crusoe didn't look at him when they all made
their way up to the house for breakfast. He'd been gereaming

their way up to the house for breakfast. He'd been screaming in his sleep, then. A dull red flush burned up from his belly, radiating from a core of hot lead somewhere deep inside. He felt as though he'd swallowed a two-pound shot, fresh from

the cannon's mouth.

He'd dreamed, he knew that much. Had wakened before dawn, shaking and drenched with sweat. It had been a dream of Culloden, because all he recalled was the sickening feel of a sword driven into flesh, the momentary toughness just before the skin split, the yielding drive into muscle and the grate and jar of bone. The feeling still quivered in his left arm; he kept flexing his hand and wiping it against his thigh.

He ate nothing but managed a mug of scalding tea the color of dirt. That soothed him, and so did the walk out to the farthest paddock, bridle in hand. The air was still chilly, but the lingering snow on the fells was melting; he could hear the voice of running water, coming down through the rocks. The bogs in the low ground—"mosses," the locals called them: White Moss, Threapland Moss, Leighton Moss—would all be greening now, the ground growing softer and

more treacherous by the day.

There was a long slender switch of fresh elder floating in the horse trough in the far paddock, though there were no trees of any kind within a quarter mile and no elders nearer than the manor house. Jamie muttered, "Christ," under his breath, and plucked the stem out, dripping. The dark resinous buds had begun to split, and crumpled leaves of a vivid light green keeked out.

"He says to tell you the green branch will flower." He flung the branch over the fence. It wasn't the first. He'd found one laid across his path three days ago, when he'd brought his string in from exercise, and another yesterday, wedged into a cleft in the fence of the riding arena.

He put his hands to his mouth and shouted, "NO!" in a voice that rang off the tumbled stones at the foot of the nearest fell. He didn't expect to be heard, let alone obeyed, but it relieved his feelings. Shaking his head, he caught the horse he'd come for and made his way back to the stable.

Life had gone back to its accustomed rhythm since his meeting with Quinn, but the Irishman's pernicious influence lingered, in the form of bad dreams, as well as the mocking greenery.

And then there was Betty. Coming up to the house for his tea—much needed, he having had neither breakfast nor elevenses—he saw the lass loitering about the gate to the kitchen garden. A lady's maid had no business to be there, but the flower beds were nearby, and she had a bouquet of daffodils in one hand. She raised these to her nose and gave him a provocative look over them. He meant to go by without acknowledgment, but she stepped into his path, playfully brushing the flowers across his chest.

"They haven got any smell, have they?" he said, fending them off.

"No, but they're so pretty, aren't they?"

"If ye canna eat them, I'm no particularly inclined to

admire them. Now, if ye—" He stopped abruptly, for she had pressed into his hand a sprig of willow, with its long, fuzzy yellow catkins. A note was wrapped about the stem, secured with string.

He handed it back to her without hesitation and walked up the path.

"MacKenzie!"

He knew it was a mistake to turn around, but ingrained courtesy had turned him before he could resist. "Mistress Betty?"

"I'll tell." Her black eyes glittered, and her chin thrust out pugnaciously.

"Aye, do," he said. "And I hope ye've a fine day for it." He turned his back on her but, on second thought, turned again.

"Tell who what?" he demanded.

She blinked at that. But then a sly look came into her eyes.

"What do you *think*?" she said, and turned away in a flounce of skirts.

He shook his head, trying to shake his wits into some semblance of order. Was the bloody woman talking about what he'd thought she was talking about?

He'd assumed that she meant she'd tell Lord Dunsany that he'd been secretly meeting an Irish Jacobite on the fells. But looked at logically ... would she?

Quinn was, after all, her brother-in-law. And presumably she liked the man well enough, or why carry his messages? Would she risk having him arrested?

Was the note she had tried to give him from Quinn, in fact? He'd thought so, seeing the willow branchlet, but perhaps it was her own silly attempt at further seduction, in which case he'd just mortally offended her. He breathed heavily through his nose.

Putting that aside ... it might cause Jamie a bit of bother if she mentioned his meeting Quinn, but if you came right down to it, the one advantage of his present position was that there really wasn't much anyone could do to make it worse. He was not Dunsany's prisoner; the baronet couldn't lock him up, put him in irons, feed him on bread and water, or flog him. The most Dunsany could do was to inform Lord John Grey.

He snorted at the thought. He doubted that wee pervert could face him, after what had been said during their last meeting, let alone take issue with him over Quinn. Still, he felt a cramping in his middle at the thought of seeing Grey again and didn't want to think too much about why.

At least there was cake for the servants' tea. He could smell its aroma, warm and yeasty, and his step quickened.



If he dreamed that night, he had the mercy of not remembering it. He kept a wary eye out, but no green branches lay across his path or fell from his clothes as he dressed. Perhaps Betty had told Quinn about his ungracious response to the proffered note and the man had given up.

"Aye, that'll be the day," he muttered. He knew a number of Irishmen, and most of them persistent as saddle burrs. He also knew Quinn.

Still, the day looked like an improvement over the last—at least until word came down from the house that Lady Isobel required a groom to drive her into the town. Hanks had fallen down the ladder this morning and broken his arm—or at least he said it was broken and retired, groaning, to the loft to await the attentions of the local horse leech—and Crusoe avoided the town, he having gotten into an altercation with a blacksmith's apprentice on his last visit that had left him with a flattened nose and two black eyes.

"You go, MacKenzie," Crusoe said, pretending to be busy with a piece of harness in need of mending. "I'll take your string."

"Aye, thanks." He felt pleased at the thought of getting off Helwater for a bit. Large as the estate was, the feeling that he could not leave if he wanted to chafed him. And it had been some months since he'd been to town; he looked forward to the journey, even if it involved Lady Isobel.

Isobel Dunsany was not the horsewoman her sister, Geneva, had been. She was not precisely timid with horses, but she didn't like them, and the horses knew it. She didn't like Jamie, either, and he knew that fine well; she didn't hide it.

Nay wonder about that, he thought, handing her up into the pony trap. If Geneva told her, she likely thinks I killed her sister. He rather thought Geneva had told Isobel about his visit to Geneva's room; the sisters had been close. Almost certainly she hadn't told Isobel that she'd brought him to her bed by means of blackmail, though.

Isobel didn't look at him and jerked her elbow free of his grip the instant her foot touched the boards. That was nothing unusual—but today she turned her head suddenly, fixing him with an odd, piercing look before turning away, biting her lip.

He got up beside her and twitched the reins over the pony's back, but was aware of her eyes burning a hole in his right shoulder.

What burr's got under her saddle? he wondered. Had bloody Betty said something to her? Accused him, maybe, of interfering with her? Was that what the little besom had meant by "I'll tell"?

The lines came to him suddenly, from a play by Congreve: *Heav'n has no Rage, like Love to Hatred turn'd, / Nor Hell a Fury, like a Woman scorn'd.* Damm it, he thought irritably. Was it not possible to refuse a woman's bed without her feeling scorned? Well ... possibly not. He had a sudden distant memory of Laoghaire MacKenzie and an ill wish, a bundle of herbs tied with colored thread. He shoved it aside.

He'd read the Congreve play in Ardsmuir prison, over the course of several weekly dinners with Lord John Grey. Could still hear Grey declaim those lines, very dramatic.

As you'll answer it, take heed
This Slave commit no Violence upon
Himself. I've been deceiv'd. The Publick Safety
Requires he should be more confin'd; and none,
No not the Princes self, permitted to
Confer with him. I'll quit you to the King.
Vile and ingrate! too late thou shalt repent
The base Injustice thou hast done my Love:
Yes, thou shalt know, spite of thy past Distress,
And all those Ills which thou so long hast mourn'd;
Heav'n has no Rage, like Love to Hatred turn'd,
Nor Hell a Fury, like a Woman scorn'd.

"What?" said Lady Isobel, rather rudely.
"I beg your pardon, my lady?"
"You snorted."
"I beg your pardon, my lady."
"Hmmph."

Musick has Charms to sooth a savage Breast,
To soften Rocks, or bend a knotted Oak.
I've read, that things inanimate have mov'd,
And, as with living Souls, have been inform'd,
By Magick Numbers and persuasive Sound.
What then am I? Am I more senseless grown
Than Trees, or Flint? O force of constant Woe!
'Tis not in Harmony to calm my Griefs.
Anselmo sleeps, and is at Peace; last Night
The silent Tomb receiv'd the good Old King;

He and his Sorrows now are safely lodg'd Within its cold, but hospitable Bosom. Why am not I at Peace?

He wondered whether music really did help. He could not himself distinguish one tune from another. Still, he was pleased to know that he could recall so much of the play and passed the rest of the journey pleasantly in reciting lines to himself, being careful not to snort.



At Lady Isobel's direction, he deposited her at an imposing stone house, with instructions to come back in three hours. He nodded—she glowered at him; she thought him insolent, because he never tugged his forelock in the manner she thought proper deference (Be damned to her for a high-heided wee baggage, he thought, smiling pleasantly)—and drove to the square, where he could unhitch and water the pony.

People looked at him, startled by his size and coloring, but then went about their own business and left him to his. He hadn't any money but enjoyed himself in strolling through the narrow streets, luxuriating in the feeling that—for however short a time—no one in the world knew exactly where he was. The day was bright, though cold, and the gardens had begun to bloom with snowdrops, tulips, and daffodils, blowing in the wind. The daffodils reminded him of Betty, but he was too much at peace with himself just now to be bothered.

It was a small town, and he'd passed the house where he'd left Isobel several times. On the fourth passage, though, he glimpsed the wind-tossed feathers of her hat through a screen of thinly leaved bushes in the back garden. Surprised, he walked to the end of the street and went round the corner. From here, he had a clear view of the back garden,

neat behind a black iron fence—and a very clear view of Lady Isobel, locked in passionate embrace with a gentleman.

He ducked hastily out of sight before either of them should look up and made his way back to the square, nonplussed. Carefully casual inquiry among the loungers near the horse trough elicited the information that the house on Houghton Street with the black iron fence belonged to Mr. Wilberforce, a lawyer—and from the description of Mr. Wilberforce, it was indeed this gentleman who had been making love to Lady Isobel in his gazebo.

That explained Isobel's manner, he thought: excited, but wary lest he discover her secret. She'd had a parcel under her arm, a taped packet of documents; no doubt she'd brought them to the lawyer, her father being ill. Lord Dunsany had had a bad winter, having taken a chill that turned to pleurisy, and Isobel had come often to the town during his sickness, presumably on the family's business. Whereupon ...

Aye, well. Perhaps I'm none so worrit by what Betty might say to her ladyship.

Whistling tunelessly through his teeth, he began leisurely to hitch up the pony.



There was a notable lack of green branches for the next few days, nay a squeak out of Betty, and he began to relax. Then on Thursday, a warm bright day, Lord Dunsany came down to the paddock where Jamie was shoveling manure, accompanied by old Nanny Elspeth with William in her arms.

Lord Dunsany beckoned to the deeply suspicious nursemaid and waved to Jamie to approach. He did, his chest feeling tight, as though the air had suddenly grown too thick to breathe. "My lord," he said. He didn't bob his head, let alone knuckle his forehead or make any other physical sign of subservience, and he saw the nurse's mouth purse in disapproval. He gave her a straight, hard look and was pleased to see her rear back and glance away, sallow cheeks flushing.

He was prey to the most extraordinary array of emotions. For the most part, he succeeded in keeping his thoughts of William strictly confined, though he thought of him every day. He seldom saw the child, and when he did, it was only as a glimpse of a woolly bundle in the arms of Nanny Elspeth or Peggy, the nursemaid, taking the air on one of the balconies. He had accustomed himself to thinking of William as a sort of small, glowing light in his mind, something like the flame of a wax candle lit before a saint's statue in a dark chapel. He couldn't afford such a candle, and wouldn't be allowed into the Helwater chapel, but liked to imagine himself lighting one when he said his prayers at night. He would watch the flame catch and swell, wavering a bit and then growing tall and still. He would go to sleep then and feel it burn, a peaceful watch fire in his heart.

"MacKenzie!" Dunsany said, beaming at him and waving at the child. "I thought it time my grandson became acquainted with the horses. Will you fetch out Bella?"

"Of course, my lord."

Bella was a fine old mare, long past breeding but kept by Dunsany for the sake of their long association; she was the first broodmare he had acquired when he established the Helwater stables. She had a kind eye and a good heart, and Jamie could not have chosen better for the purpose.

He had a burning in his chest now, but this was drowned by a wash of panic, guilt, and a ferocious cramp that knotted his belly as though he'd eaten bad meat.

The old nurse eyed him suspiciously, looking slowly up from his sandaled feet to his stubbled face. Plainly she was reluctant to surrender her charge to anything that looked like that. He smiled broadly at her, and she flinched, as though menaced by a savage. *Aye, fine*, he thought. He felt savage.

He plucked the little boy neatly out of her arms, though, scarcely ruffling his gown. The boy gave a small yelp of startlement and turned his head round like an owl in amazement at being suddenly up so high.

Relief washed through him, as the wide eyes stared into his face. His guilty conscience had convinced him that William was an exact small replica of himself, whose resemblance would be noted at once by anyone who saw them together. But William's round face and snub nose bore not the slightest likeness to his own features. While the child's eyes could be called blue, they were pale, an indeterminate shade between gray and blue, the color of a clouded sky.

That was all he had time to take in, as he turned without hesitation to settle the little boy on the horse's back. As he guided the chubby hands to grasp the saddle's edge, though, talking in a conversational tone that soothed horse and child together, he saw that William's hair was—thank God!—not at all red. A soft middling brown, cut in a pudding-bowl style like one of Cromwell's Roundhead soldiers. True, there was a reddish cast to it in the sunlight, but, after all, Geneva's hair had been a rich chestnut.

He looks like his mother, he thought, and sent a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving toward the Blessed Virgin.

"Now, then, Willie," said Lord Dunsany, patting the boy's back. "Just you hold on tight. MacKenzie will take you round the paddock."

Willie looked very dubious at this proposal, and his chin drew back into the neck of his smock. "Mo!" he said, and, letting go the saddle, swung his fat little leg awkwardly to the rear, plainly intending to get off, though the ground was

some feet below him.

Jamie grabbed him before he could fall.

"Mo!" Willie repeated, struggling to get down. "Momomomomo!"

"He means 'no,' " the nurse murmured, not displeased, and reached for the boy. "I said he was too young. Here, poppet, you come to Nanny Elspeth. We'll go back to the nursery and have our nice tea."

"Mo!" Willie said shrilly, and capriciously flung himself round, burrowing into Jamie's chest.

"Now, now," his grandfather soothed, reaching for him. "Come to me, lad, we'll go and—"

"MOMOMOMOMO ..."

Jamie put a hand over the child's mouth, stilling the racket momentarily.

"We'll go and speak to the horses, aye?" he said firmly, and hoisted the child up onto his shoulders before Willie could make up his mind to shriek some more. Diverted by this splendid new perch, Willie crowed and grabbed Jamie's hair. Not waiting to hear any objections, Jamie took hold of the chubby knees wrapped round his ears and headed for the stable.

"Now, this sweet auld lad is Deacon," he said, squatting down to bring Willie to eye level with the old gelding, who lifted his nose, nostrils flaring with interest. "We call him Deke. Can ye say that? Deke?"

Willie squealed and pulled on Jamie's hair but didn't jerk away, and after a moment, urged on by his grandfather, put out a hand and ventured a hasty pat. "Deke," he said, and laughed, charmed. "Deke!"

Jamie was careful to visit only those horses of age and temperament to deal well with a two-year-old child, but he was pleased—as was Lord Dunsany—to see that William wasn't afraid of the enormous animals. Jamie kept as careful an eye on the old man as he did on the child; his lordship's

color was bad, his hands skeletal, and Jamie could hear the air whistle in his lungs when he breathed. In spite of everything, he rather liked Dunsany and hoped the baronet wasn't about to die in the stable aisle.

"Oh, there's my lovely Phil," said Dunsany, breaking into a smile as they came up to one of the loose boxes. At his voice, Philemon, a beautiful eight-year-old dark bay, lifted his head and gazed at them for a moment with a soft-lashed, open look before putting his head down again, nibbling up some spilled oats from the floor.

Dunsany fumbled with the latch, and Jamie hastily reached to open the door. The horse didn't object to their coming into the box, merely shifting his huge rump a bit to one side, tail swishing.

"Now, ye must never go behind a horse," Jamie told William. "If ye startle them, they might kick, aye?" The little boy's soft chestnut hair whorled up in a cowlick at his crown. He nodded solemnly but then struggled to get down.

Jamie glanced at Dunsany, who nodded, then he set William carefully on the floor, ready to snatch him up again if he shrieked or made a rumpus. But William stood stock still, mouth a little open, watching in fascination as the huge head came close to him, soft lips nibbling at the grain, and with the oddest sense of dislocation, Jamie suddenly felt himself on the floor of a stable, hearing the deep slobbering crunch of a horse's chewing just beside him, seeing the huge, glassy hooves, smelling hay and oats and the wonderful pungent scent of the horse's warm hide. There had been the feeling of someone behind him, he'd been aware of the man's big legs in their woolen hose and he heard his father laugh and say something above him, but all he'd had eyes for was the horse, that massive, beautiful, gentle creature, so amazing that he'd wanted to embrace it.

William did embrace it. Entranced, he toddled forward and hugged Philemon's head in an access of pure love. The

horse's long-lashed eyes widened in surprise and he blew out air through his nose, ruffling the child's clothes, but did no more than bob his head a bit, lifting Willie a few inches into the air, then setting him gently down as he resumed his eating.

William laughed, a giggle of pure delight, and Jamie and Lord Dunsany looked at each other and smiled, then glanced aside, each embarrassed.

Later, Jamie watched them go, William insisting upon walking, his grandfather limping behind the sturdy little form like an aged black crane, leaning heavily on his walking stick, the two of them washed in the pale gold of the soft spring sun.

Does Dunsany know? he wondered. He was nearly sure that Lady Isobel did. Betty, quite possibly. If Lady Dunsany knew, though, she kept her own counsel, and he doubted that she would tell her husband, not wishing to shock or grieve him.

Still, the auld gentleman's no a fool. And Dunsany had been in that drawing room at Ellesmere, the day after his grandson's birth and his daughter's death, when Geneva's husband, the old Earl of Ellesmere, had raged that the child was a bastard—and Geneva Dunsany a whore—and had threatened to drop tiny William from a window onto the paving stones thirty feet below.

Jamie had seized a loaded pistol from Jeffries—the coachman, summoned with Jamie to help calm the earl—and had shot Ellesmere. Aye, well. It did calm the auld fiend, and may he burn in hell.

Nothing had been said to Jamie. Nothing. In the aftermath of the explosion, when Jamie had stood shaking on the hearth rug, the rescued infant in his arms—his shot had gone through the baby's draperies, missing William by an inch—Lord Dunsany had bent calmly over Ellesmere's body, pressing his fingers to the slack, fleshy throat. Then, satisfied, had come and taken the boy from Jamie's arms and

told Jeffries to take Jamie to the kitchen and get him some brandy.

In the staggeringly practical way of the English, Lord Dunsany had then sent word to the local coroner that Lord Ellesmere had suffered a sad accident, to which Jeffries testified. Jamie had neither been named nor called. A few days later, the old earl and his very young wife, Geneva, had been buried together, and a week after that, Jeffries took his leave, pensioned off to County Sligo.

All the servants knew what had happened, of course. If anything, it made them even more afraid of Jamie, but they said nothing to him—or to anyone else—about the matter. It was the business of the family, and no one else. There would be no scandal.

Lord Dunsany had never said a word to Jamie, and presumably never would. Yet there was an odd sense of ... not friendship—it could never be anything like that—but of regard between them.

Jamie toyed for an instant with the notion of telling Dunsany about Isobel and the lawyer Wilberforce. Were it his daughter, he should certainly want to know. He dismissed it, though, and turned back to his work. It was the business of the family, and no one else.



Jamie was still in a good humor as he bridled the horses for exercise the next morning, mind filled with a pleasant muddle of memories past and of present content. There was a fuzzy bank of cloud above the fells, betokening later rain, but no wind, and for the moment the air was cold but still and the horses bright but not frenetic, tossing their heads with anticipation of a gallop.

"MacKenzie." He hadn't heard the man's footsteps on the sawdust of the paddock, and turned, a little startled. More startled to see George Roberts, one of the footmen. It was usually Sam Morgan who came to tell him to saddle a horse or hitch up the carriage; Roberts was a senior footman, and such errands were beneath him.

"I want to talk to you." Roberts was in his livery breeches but wore a shapeless loose jacket over his shirt. His hands hung half curled at his sides, and something in his face and voice made Jamie draw himself up a little.

"I'm about my work now," Jamie said, courteous. He gestured at the four horses he had on leading reins and at Augustus, still waiting to be saddled. "Come just after dinner, if ye like. I'll have time then."

"You'll have time now," said Roberts, in an odd, halfstrangled voice. "It won't take long."

Jamie nearly took the punch, not expecting it. But the man gave clear notice, falling back on his heel and pulling back his fist as though he meant to hurl a stone, and Jamie dodged by reflex. Roberts shot past, unbalanced, and came up with a thud, catching himself on the fence. The horses who were tied to it all shied, stamping and snorting, not liking this kind of nonsense so early in the day.

"What the devil d'ye think you're doing?" Jamie asked, more in a tone of curiosity than hostility. "Or, more to the point, what d'ye think *I've* done?"

Roberts pushed away from the fence, his face congested. He was not quite as tall as Jamie but heavier in the body.

"You know damned well what you've done, you Scotch bugger!"

Jamie eyed the man and lifted one brow.

"A guessing game, is it? Aye, well, then. Someone pissed in your shoes this morning, and the bootboy said it was me?"

Surprise lifted Roberts's scowl for an instant.

"What?"

"Or someone's gone off wi' his lordship's sealing wax?" He reached into the pocket of his breeches and drew out the

stub of black wax. "He gave it to me; ye can ask him."

Fresh blood crimsoned Roberts's cheeks; the household staff objected very much to Jamie being allowed to write letters and did as much as they dared to obstruct him. To Roberts's credit, though, he swallowed his choler and, after breathing heavily for a moment, said, "Betty. That name ring a bell?"

It rang a whole carillon. What had the gagging wee bitch been saying?

"I ken the woman, aye." He spoke warily, keeping an eye on Roberts's feet and a hand on Augustus's bridle.

Roberts's lip curled. He was good-looking, in a heavy-featured way, but the sneer didn't flatter him.

"You *ken* the woman, do you, cully? You've bloody interfered with her!"

"I'll tell," she'd said, thrusting out her chin at him. She hadn't said who she'd tell—nor that she'd tell the truth.

"No," he said calmly, and, wrapping Augustus's rein neatly round the fence rail, he stepped away from the horses and turned to face Roberts squarely. "I haven't. Did ye ask her where and when? For I'm reasonably sure I havena been out of sight o' the stables in a month, save for takin' the horses out." He nodded toward the waiting string, not taking his eyes off the footman. "And she canna have left the house to meet me on the fells."

Roberts hesitated, and Jamie took the chance to press back.

"Ye might ask yourself, man, why she'd say such a thing to you."

"What? Why shouldn't she say it to me?" The footman drew his chin into his heavy neck, the better to glower.

"If she wanted me arrested or whipped or gaoled, she'd ha' complained to his lordship or the constable," Jamie pointed out, his tone still civil. "If she wanted me beaten to a pudding, she'd have told Morgan and Billings, as well,

because—meaning nay disrespect—I dinna think ye can manage that on your own."

The beginnings of doubt were flickering over Roberts's heavy countenance.

"But she—"

"So either she thought she'd put a flea in your ear about me and there'd be a punch-up that would do neither of us any good—or she didna think ye'd come to me but that ye'd maybe be roused on her behalf."

"Roused?" Roberts sounded confused.

Jamie drew breath, aware for the first time that his heart was pounding.

"Aye," he said. "The lass didna say I'd raped her, now, did she? No, of course not."

"Noo ..." Roberts had gone from confusion to open doubt now. "She said you'd been a-cupping of her, toying with her breasts and the like."

"Well, there ye are," Jamie said, with a small wave toward the house. "She was only meaning to make ye jealous, in hopes that ye'd be moved to do something o' the kind yourself. That," he added helpfully, "or she meant to get ye into trouble. I hope the lass hasna got anything against ye."

Roberts's brow darkened, but with an inward thought. He glanced up at Jamie.

"I hadn't had it in mind to strike you," he said, with a certain formality. "I only meant to tell you to keep away from her."

"Verra reasonable," Jamie assured him. His shirt was damp with sweat, despite the cold day. "I dinna mean to have anything to do with the lass. Ye can tell her she's safe from me," he added, as solemnly as he could manage.

Roberts inclined his head in a professional way and offered his hand. Jamie shook it, feeling very odd, and watched the man go off toward the house, straightening his shoulders as he went.



Jamie heard at breakfast next day that his lordship was ill again and had taken to his bed. He felt a stab of disappointment at the news; he had hoped the old man would bring William to the stable again.

To his surprise, he did see William at the stable again, proud as Lucifer in his first pair of breeches and this time in the company of the under-nursemaid, Peggy. The young, stout woman told him that Nanny Elspeth and Lord and Lady Dunsany were all suffering from *la grippe* (which she pronounced in the local way, as "lah gerp") but that William had made such a nuisance of himself, wanting to see the horses again, that Lady Isobel told Peggy to bring him.

"Are ye quite well yourself, ma'am?" He could see that she wasn't. She was pale as green cheese, with much the same clammy look to her skin, and hunched a little, as though she wanted to clutch her belly.

"I ... yes. Of course," she said, a little faintly. Then she took a grip on herself and straightened. "Willie, I think we must go back to the house."

"Mo!" Willie at once ran down the aisle, tiny boots clattering on the bricks.

"William!"

"MO!" Willie screamed, turning to face her, his face going red. "Mo, mo, mo!"

Peggy breathed heavily, clearly torn between her own illness and the need to chase the wee reprobate. A drop of sweat ran down her plump throat and made a small dark spot on her kerchief.

"Ma'am," Jamie said respectfully. "Had ye not best go and sit down for a bit? Perhaps put cold water on your wrists? I can watch the lad; he'll come to nay harm."

Without waiting for an answer, he turned and called to Willie.

"Ye'll come with me, lad. Ye can help me with the mash."

Willie's small face went instantly from a stubborn clench to a radiant joy, and he clattered back, beaming. Jamie bent and scooped him up, setting him on his shoulders. Willie shrieked with pleasure and grabbed Jamie's hair. Jamie smiled at Mrs. Peggy.

"We'll do."

"I ... I really ... well ... all right," she said weakly. "Just ... just for a bit." Turning, she shuffled hastily off.

Looking after her, he murmured, "Poor woman." At the same time, he hoped that her difficulties would detain her for some while, and asked a quick forgiveness from God for the thought.

"Poo ooman," Willie echoed solemnly, and pressed his knees to Jamie's ears. "Go!"

They went. The mash tub was in the tack room, and he parked William on a stool and reached down a bridle with a snaffle for the boy to play with, clicking the jointed bit to make a noise.

"D'ye remember the names of the horses, then?" he asked, measuring out the grain into the tub with the wooden scoop. William frowned, pausing in his clicking.

"Mo."

"Oh, aye, ye do. Bella? Ye ken Bella fine; ye rode on her back."

"Bella!"

"Aye, see? And what about Phil—he's the sweet lad that let ye hug his nose."

"Pill!"

"That's right. And next to Phil, there's ..." They worked their way verbally down both sides of the aisle, stall by stall, Jamie saying the names and William repeating them, while Jamie poured the molasses, thick and black as tar and nearly as pungent, into the grain.

"I'm going to fetch the hot water," he told Willie. "You

stay just there—dinna move about—and I'll be with ye in a moment."

Willie, engaged in an unsuccessful effort to get the bit into his own mouth, ignored this but made no move to follow him.

Jamie took a bucket and put his head into the factor's office, where Mr. Grieves was talking to Mr. Lowens, a farmer whose land abutted that of Dunsany's estate. Grieves nodded to him, and he came in, going to dip hot water from the cauldron kept simmering in the back of the hearth. The factor's office was the only warm place in the stable block, so was often a gathering place for visitors.

He made his way back, careful with the heavy, steaming bucket, and found Willie still sitting on his stool but having now succeeded in entangling his head and arms in the bridle, which he'd evidently tried to put on.

"Elp!" Willie said, thrashing wildly. "Elp, elp, elp!"

"Aye, I'll help ye, ye wee gomerel. Here, then." Jamie set down the bucket and went to assist, thanking his guardian angel that Willie hadn't managed to strangle himself. No wonder the little fiend required two nursemaids to watch him.

He patiently untangled the bridle—how could a child who couldn't dress himself tie knots like that?—and hung it up, then, with an admonition to Willie to keep well back, poured the hot water into the bran tub.

"Ye want to help stir?" He held out the big worn paddle—which was roughly as tall as Willie—and they stirred the mash, Willie clinging earnestly to the lower part of the handle, Jamie to the upper. The mix was stiff, though, and Willie gave up after a moment, leaving Jamie to finish the job.

He'd just about finished ladling the mash into buckets for distribution to the mangers when he noticed that William had something in his mouth. "What's that ye've got in your mouth?"

Willie opened his mouth and picked out a wet horseshoe nail, which he regarded with interest. Jamie imagined in a split second what would have happened if the lad had swallowed it, and panic made him speak more roughly than he might have.

"Give it here!"

"Mo!" Willie jerked his hand away and glowered at Jamie under wispy brows that nonetheless were well marked.

"Nnnnn," Jamie said, leaning down close and glowering in his turn. "Nnnnno."

Willie looked suspicious and uncertain.

"Mo," he repeated, but with less surety.

"It's 'no,' believe me," Jamie assured him, straightening up and pulling the bucket of mash closer. "Ye've heard your auntie Isobel say it, have ye not?" He *hoped* Isobel—or someone—said it to Willie on occasion. Not often enough, he was sure of that.

Willie appeared to be thinking this over and, in the process, absently raised the nail to his mouth again and began licking it. Jamie cast a wary look toward the door, but no one was watching.

"Does it taste well?" he asked casually. The question of taste appeared not to have occurred to Willie, who looked startled and frowned at the nail, as though wondering where it had come from.

"Es," he said, but uncertainly.

"Give me a taste, then." He leaned toward the child, putting out his tongue, and Willie blinked once, then obligingly reached the nail up. Jamie folded his hand very gently around Willie's fist and drew his tongue delicately up the length of the nail. It tasted, naturally enough, of iron and horse hoof, but he had to admit that it wasn't a bad taste at all.

"It's no bad," he said, drawing back—but keeping his hand

round Willie's. "Think it would break your teeth, though, if ye chewed it."

Willie giggled at the idea.

"It would break the horses' teeth, too, see? That's why we dinna leave such things lyin' about in the stable." He gestured through the open door of the tack room toward the row of stalls, where two or three equine heads were poking out, inquisitive as to the whereabouts of their dinner.

"Horsie," Willie said, very clearly.

"Horse, indeed," Jamie said, and smiled at him.

"Horsie eat dis?" Willie leaned curiously over the mash tub, sniffing loudly.

"Aye, they do. That's good food—not like nails. No one eats nails."

Willie had clearly forgotten the nail, though he was still holding it. He glanced at it and dropped it, whereupon Jamie picked it up and tucked it into his breeches. Willie promptly stuck a small hand into the mash and, liking the sticky feel of it, laughed and slapped his hand a couple of times on the quivering surface of the molasses-laced grain. Jamie reached out and took him by the wrist.

"Now, then," he said. "Ye wouldna like it if Deke put his hoof into *your* dinner, would ye?"

"Heeheeheehee."

"Well, then. Here, wipe your hand and ye can help me put the mash out." He pulled a relatively clean handkerchief from his shirtsleeve, but Willie ignored it, instead licking the sweet, sticky stuff from his fingers with every evidence of enjoyment.

Well, he had told the lad it was food, and it was wholesome enough—though he sincerely hoped Mrs. Peggy wasn't about to reappear, or they'd both be for it.

Peggy didn't reappear, and they spent a companionable quarter hour pouring mash, then forking fresh hay from the stack outside into a wheelbarrow and trundling it into the stable. On the way back, they met Mr. Lowens, looking satisfied. Whatever haggling he'd been doing with Grieves, he thought he'd got the best of it.

"MacKenzie," he said, with a cordial nod. He smiled at William, who, Jamie noticed with some dismay, had molasses down his shirt and a good deal of hay sticking out of his hair. "That your lad, is it?"

For an instant, he thought his heart would leap straight out of his mouth. He took a quick gulp of air, though, and answered calmly, "No, sir. This would be the young earl. The Earl of Ellesmere."

"Oh, aye?" Lowens laughed and squatted down to speak to Willie directly. "Knew your father, I did. Randy old bugger," he remarked to Jamie. "But he knew his horses, old Earl did. Going to be a good horseman, too, are you?" he said, returning his attention to Willie.

"Es!"

"Good lad, good lad." He reached out and ruffled Willie's hair. Willie glowered at him. "Breeched already? You're young for that." He affected to sniff deeply. "Smell a bit ripe. You've not shit yourself, have you, my lord?" He chuckled fatly, amused at his own wit.

William's eyes narrowed, in a way that reminded Jamie vividly of his own sister about to go berserk. He thanked God again that the boy's features were rounded and snub, and prepared to grab him if he tried to kick Mr. Lowens in the shins.

Instead, though, the young earl merely glared up at the farmer and said loudly and distinctly, "NNNNNNO!"

"Oh!" said Lowens, laughing. "My mistake. My apologies, my lord."

"We must be going, sir," Jamie said hastily, before William could execute any of the thoughts that were clearly going through his mind. He swung the boy off his feet and held him upside down by the ankles. "It's time for his lordship's



Summoning

Peggy never did come back. Jamie carried William—now right side up—back to the house and delivered him to one of the kitchen maids, who told him that Peggy was "took bad" but that she would bring his little lordship along to Lady Isobel.

Willie objected vociferously to this proposal—so vociferously that Isobel herself appeared—and was pacified only by the promise that he could visit the stable again tomorrow. Jamie carefully avoided Isobel's hard eye and absented himself as quickly as he could.

He wondered whether William *would* come back. Isobel wouldn't bring him, he was sure of that. But if Peggy felt better, and if William insisted—William struck him as being singularly stubborn, even for a child of two. He smiled at the thought.

Can't think where he gets that, he thought, and quite suddenly wondered whether his other son was the same. Claire's son.

Lord, he thought automatically, as he did whenever thought of them came to his mind, that she might be safe. She and the child.

How old would his first child be now? He swallowed a thickness in his throat but continued doggedly in his train of thought. Claire had been two months gone with child when she'd stepped through the stones and back to Frank.

"God bless you, ye bloody English bastard," he said through his teeth. It was his customary prayer when Frank Randall came to his mind—something he tried to avoid happening, but now and then ... "Mind them well!"

Two months gone, and that had been April the 16, *Anno Domini* 1746. Now it was April again, and 1760. If time went on in a normal fashion—and he saw no reason why it should not—then the child would be almost fourteen.

"Christ, he's nearly a man," he whispered, and his hand closed tight on the fence rail, so tight he felt the grain of the wood.

As with Frank Randall, Jamie tried to keep from thinking too much or too specifically of Claire or of the unknown child. It hurt too much, brought home to him too vividly what he had had, and what he had lost.

He hadn't been able to avoid thinking of them, living in the cave on his own estate at Lallybroch, during the first years after Culloden. There was too little to occupy his mind, and they had crept in, his family, glimmering in the smoke when he sat by his wee fire—when he'd felt safe enough to have one—shining in the starlight when he sat outside the cave at night watching the heavens, seeing the same stars that they must see, taking comfort in the everlasting light that lay softly on him and his.

Then he'd imagined his son and holding a small, solid body on his knee, the child's heart beating against his own—and his hands curved without his willing it, remembering now what Willie felt like in his arms.



He was carrying a huge basket of rotted manure up to the kitchen garden next morning when Morgan, one of the footmen, appeared from behind a wall and hailed him.

"Hoy, MacKenzie! You're wanted!"

He was surprised; it was mid-morning, not a usual time for visiting or errands. He'd have to catch that wee bitch Venus, presently enjoying herself in the back pasture. And the thought of driving the pony trap, with Lady Isobel's slitted eyes burning holes in his flesh, was less than appealing. It wasn't as though he had a choice, though, and he set the basket down, safely off the path, then straightened up, dusting his hands against his thighs.

"Aye, I'll have the trap round in a quarter hour."

"Not the trap," Morgan said, impatient. "I said *you're* wanted."

He glanced at the man, startled.

"Who wants me?"

"Not me, I assure you." Morgan had a long nose, and he wrinkled it ostentatiously, looking at the greenish-brown crumbles and smears on Jamie's clothes. "If there was time, I'd make you change your shirt, but there's not. He said at once, and he meant it."

"Lord Dunsany?" Jamie asked, ignoring the footman's barb.

"Who else?" Morgan was already turning away. He looked back over his shoulder and jerked his head. "Come on, then!"



He felt strange. The polished wood floor echoed under his tread and the air smelled of hearth ash, books, and flowers. He smelled of horses, horseshit, and his own bitter sweat. Since the day he'd come to Helwater, he'd only twice been farther into the house than the kitchen where he took his meals.

Lord Dunsany had received John Grey and him in the study on that first day, and now the butler—back stiff with disapproval—led him down the corridor to the same door.

The wooden panels were carved with small rosettes; he had noticed them so intensely on his first visit that seeing them again recalled his emotions on that day—and gave him now a feeling as though he had missed the bottom step of a flight of stairs.

His immediate assumption on hearing the summons was that Isobel had seen him outside Wilberforce's house and decided to eliminate the possibility of his telling on her by informing her father of the truth of William's paternity, and his heart was in his throat, his mind filled with half-formed notions between outright panic and ... something else. Would Dunsany cast the boy out? If he did.... A faint, breathtaking vision of himself walking away from Helwater, his son in his arms, came to him—but vanished at once as the door opened.

There were three men in Lord Dunsany's study. Soldiers, in uniform. A lieutenant and two private soldiers, he thought, though it had been a long time since he'd troubled with the distinctions of English uniform.

"This is MacKenzie," Lord Dunsany said, with a small nod at him. "Or rather ... Fraser."

The officer looked him up and down, assessing, but his face gave nothing away. A middle-aged man, with a sour look. He didn't offer his name.

"You're to go with these men, Fraser," Dunsany said. His face was old, his expression remote. "Do as they tell you."

He stood mute. Damned if he'd say, "Yes, sir," and double-damned if he'd knuckle his forehead like a servant. The officer looked sharply at him, then at Dunsany, to see whether this insubordination was to be punished, but, finding nothing but weariness in the old man's face, shrugged slightly and nodded to the privates.

They moved purposefully toward him, one taking him by each arm. He couldn't avoid it but felt the urge to jerk himself free. They led him into the hall and out the front door; he could see the butler smirking from his pantry and two of the maids hanging wide-eyed and openmouthed out of the upper windows as the men emerged onto the drive, where a coach stood waiting.

"Where are ye taking me?" he asked, with what calmness he could.

The men glanced at each other; one shrugged.

"You're going to London," he said.

"To visit the Queen," the other said, and sniggered.

He had to duck to enter the carriage and, in doing so, turned his head. Lady Isobel stood in the window, mouth open in shock. William was in her arms, small head laid in sleep on her shoulder. Behind them, Betty smiled at him, maliciously pleased.

SECTION II



Force Majeure



When a Man Is Tired of London, He Is Tired of Life

The soldiers gave him a serviceable cloak to wear and food at the taverns and inns, shoving it indifferently across the table toward him, ignoring him while they talked, save an occasional sharp glance to be sure he wasn't getting up to something. What, exactly, did they think he might do? he wondered. If he'd ever meant to escape, he could have done it much more easily from Helwater.

He gathered nothing from their conversation, which seemed mostly regimental gossip, bawdy remarks about women, and low jokes. Not a word as to their destination.

At the second stop, there was wine—decent wine. He drank it cautiously; he hadn't tasted anything stronger than small beer in years, and the lush flavor clung to his palate and rose like smoke inside his head. The soldiers shared three bottles—and so did he, welcoming the slowing of his racing thoughts as the alcohol seeped into his blood. It would do him no good to think, until he knew what to think about.

He tried to keep his mind off their unknown destination and what might await him there, but it was like trying not to think of a—

"Rhinoceros," Claire said, with a muffled snort of amusement that stirred the hairs on his chest. "Have you ever seen one?"

"I have," he said, shifting her weight so she rested more comfortably in the hollow of his shoulder. "In Louis's zoo. Aye, that would stick in the mind."

Abruptly, she vanished and left him sitting there, blinking stupidly into his wine cup.

Had it really happened, that memory? Or was it only his desire that now and then brought her so vividly to life, in snatched moments that left him desperate with longing but strangely comforted, as though she had in fact touched him briefly?

He became aware that the soldiers had all stopped talking and were staring at him. And that he was smiling. He looked back at them over his cup, not altering his expression.

They looked away, uneasy, and he went back to his wife, for the moment tranquil in his mind.



They did take him to London.

He tried not to gawk; he was aware of the soldiers casting covert glances at him, sly smiles. They expected him to be impressed, and he declined to give them the satisfaction—but he was impressed, nonetheless.

So this was London. It had the stink of any city, the narrow alleys, the smell of slops and chimney smoke. But any large city has its own soul, and London was quite different from either Paris or Edinburgh. Paris was secretive, self-satisfied; Edinburgh solidly busy, a merchants' town. But this ... It was rowdy, churning like an anthill, and gave off a sense of pushing, as though the energy of the place would burst its bonds and spill out over the countryside, spill out into the world at large. His blood stirred, despite his fears and the tooth-jolting ride.

The Jacobite soldiers would talk about London, early in the campaign, when they were victorious and London seemed a plum within their grasp. Wild tales—almost none of them had ever seen a city, before they came to Edinburgh. Talk of gold plates in the taverns, streets with gilded carriages thick as lice ...

He remembered Murdo Lindsay, bug-eyed at the description of boozing kens, where the poor clustered in dark cellars, drowning the misery of life in Holland gin.

"Whole families!" Murdo exclaimed. "All of them, dead drunk! If even the poor folk can afford to stay drunk for days at a time, what must the rich ones be like?"

He'd smiled then, amused. He smiled now, bitter.

As the campaign had turned, withering in the cold, when the army camped at Derby, shivering while the commanders argued whether to push on or not, the soldiers had still talked of London. But they talked in whispers then, and not of gold plates and Holland gin. They talked of the gallows, of the famous Bridge, where the heads of traitors were displayed. Of the Tower.

That thought sent a qualm through him. Christ, could they be taking him there? He was a convicted traitor, though paroled these past four years. And he was the grandson of Lord Lovat, who had met his death on the block at that same Tower. He hadn't been fond of his grandfather, but crossed himself and murmured "Fois air Anam …" under his breath. Peace on his soul.

He wondered what the devil the Tower of London looked like. He'd imagined it, of course, but God only knew what the reality was. It was big, though; it had to be big. So he'd have a bit of warning, seeing it. He'd be prepared.

Aye, prepared for prison? he thought. The idea of it, of cold stone and small spaces, endless days, months, and years in a cage as life and body dwindled inexorably away, shriveled his heart. And William. He would never see William again. But they might kill him instead. At the moment, that was his only hope.

But why? Had his parole been revoked? That last, disastrous conversation with John Grey ... His fists curled up without thought, and one of the soldiers started, looking at him hard. With an effort, he unclenched his hands and pulled them inside his cloak, gripping his thighs under its cover hard enough to leave bruises.

He hadn't seen—or heard from—Grey since that day. Had the man been nursing a grudge all this time and finally decided to put paid to Jamie Fraser's account, once and for all? It was the most likely explanation—and unforgivable things had been said on both sides. Worse, both of them had meant the things they said, and both of them knew it. No excuse of hot blood speaking—though, in all justice, his own blood had boiled, and ...

There it was. He gasped, couldn't help it, though it made all the soldiers look at him, conversation interrupted.

It had to be. He knew the look of a prison well enough. Huge round towers set in a grim high wall, and the filthy brown water of a broad river flowing past, flowing under an iron-barred gate. The Traitors' Gate? He'd heard of it.

All of them were grinning at him, maliciously enjoying his shock. He swallowed hard and tensed his belly muscles. They wouldn't see him cower. His pride was all he had left—but he had enough of that.

But the carriage didn't leave the road. They bowled past the grim bulk of the moated tower, the horses' hooves ringing on cobbles, and he blessed the sound because it drowned the wrenching gasp when he realized he'd stopped breathing and started again.

It wasn't a warm day, but he was drenched in sudden sweat and saw the private behind him wrinkle his nose and glance sideways at him. He reeked of fear, could smell himself.

Could ha' been worse, a bhalaich, he thought, coldly meeting the man's eye and staring 'til he looked away. I

might have shit myself and ye'd have to ride into London smelling that.



What with the tangle of foot traffic, barrows, carriages, and horses that thronged the narrow streets, it was more than an hour before the coach finally pulled up outside a massive house that stood in its own walled grounds at the edge of a huge open park. He stared at it in astonishment. If not the tower, he'd certainly expected to be taken to a gaol of some kind. Who the devil lived here, and what did whoever it was want of him?

The soldiers didn't tell him, and he wouldn't ask.

To his amazement, they took him up the marble steps to the front door, where they made him wait while the lieutenant banged at the knocker, then spoke to the butler who answered it. The butler was a small, neat man, who blinked in disbelief at sight of Jamie, then turned to the lieutenant, plainly about to remonstrate.

"His Grace said bring him, and I've brought him," said the lieutenant impatiently. "Show us in!"

His Grace? A duke? What the devil might a duke want The only duke with him? he was ... God ... Cumberland? His heart had already been in his throat; now his wame tried to follow it. He'd seen the Duke of Cumberland only once. When he'd left the battlefield at Culloden, wounded, hidden under a load of hay in a wagon. The wagon had passed through the edge of the government lines, just at evening, and he'd seen the big tent, a squat, vigorous figure outside it irritably waving away clouds of smoke with a gold-laced hat. The smoke of burning bodies—the smoke of the Jacobite dead.

He felt the soldiers jerk and glance at him, startled. He froze, fists at his side, but the chill and the fear were gone,

burned away by the sense of rage that rose abruptly, drawing him upright with it.

His heart beat painfully, eager, for all at once the future had a shape to it. No more long days of mere survival. He had purpose, and the glow of it lit his soul.

The butler was falling back, reluctant, but unable to resist. Aye, fine. All he need do was behave circumspectly until he got within grip of the duke. He flexed his left hand briefly. There might be a knife, a letter opener, something ... but it didn't matter.

The lieutenant jerked his head, and he moved, just in time to keep the privates from grasping his arms. He saw the butler's eyes fix on his feet, mouth twisted in a sneer of contempt. A door opened in the hallway and a woman's face appeared for a moment. She caught sight of him, gasped, and closed the door.

He would in fact have wiped his sandals, had they given him time; he'd no desire either to foul the house nor to look like the barbarian they plainly thought him. The men hastened him along, though, one on either side, and he had even less wish to give them an excuse to lay their hands on him, so he went, leaving dusty prints crumbled with dry mud and caked manure along the polished floor of the hallway.

The door to the room was open, and they propelled him inside without ceremony. He was looking everywhere at once, gauging distances, estimating the possibilities of objects as weapons, and it was a long instant before his eyes met those of the man seated at the desk.

For a moment longer, his mind refused to grasp the reality, and he blinked. No, it wasn't Cumberland. Not even the passage of years could have transformed a stout German prince into the slender, fine-featured man frowning at him across the polished wood.

"Mr. Fraser." It wasn't quite a question, nor was it quite a greeting, though the man inclined his head courteously.

Jamie was breathing as though he'd run a mile, hands shaking slightly as his body tried to burn away anger that now had no outlet.

"Who are you?" he asked rudely.

The man shot a sharp glance at the lieutenant.

"Did you not tell him, Mr. Gaskins?"

Gaskins. It was a minor relief to know the bugger's name. And a distinct pleasure to see him go red and then white.

"I ... er ... I ... no, sir."

"Leave us, Lieutenant." The man didn't raise his voice, but it cut like a razor. *He's a soldier*, Jamie thought, and then, *I ken him*. But where ...?

The man stood up, ignoring Lieutenant Gaskins's hasty departure.

"My apologies, Mr. Fraser," he said. "Were you mistreated on your journey?"

"No," he replied automatically, scrutinizing the face before him. It was remarkably familiar, and yet he would swear he didn't ... "Why am I here?"

The man drew a deep breath, the frown easing, and as it did, Jamie saw the shape of the man's face, fine-boned and beautiful, though showing the marks of a hard life. He felt as though someone had punched him in the chest.

"Jesus," he said. "Ye're John Grey's brother." He groped madly for the name and found it. "Lord ... Melton. Jesus Christ."

"Well, yes," the man said. "Though I don't use that title any longer. I've become the Duke of Pardloe since we last met." He smiled wryly. "It has been some time. Please sit down, Mr. Fraser."



Debts of Honor

He was so shocked that he went on standing there, gaping like a loon at the man. Melton—Pardloe, rather—looked him up and down, brows slightly knit in concentration.

Recovering himself, Jamie sat down abruptly, the gilded chair feeling flimsy and strange under his buttocks. Pardloe sat, too, and without taking his eyes off Jamie's face shouted, "Pilcock! I want you!"

This produced a footman—Jamie didn't turn to look at the man but heard the deferential tread, the murmured "Your Grace?" behind him.

"Bring us some whisky, Pilcock," Pardloe said, still eyeing Jamie. "And biscuits—no, not biscuits, something more substantial."

Pilcock made a questioning noise, causing the duke to glance over Jamie's shoulder at him, features creasing in irritation.

"How should I know? Meat pies. Leftover joint. Roast peacock, for God's sake. Go ask Cook; go ask your mistress!"

"Yes, Your Grace!"

Pardloe shook his head, then looked at Jamie again.

"Got your bearings now?" he inquired in a perfectly normal tone of voice, as though resuming an interrupted conversation. "I mean—you recall me?"

"I do."

He did, and the recollection jarred him almost as much as finding Pardloe instead of the Duke of Cumberland. He clutched the seat of the chair, steadying himself against the memory.

Two days past the battle, and the smoke of burning bodies swirled thick over the moor, a greasy fog that seeped into the cottage where the wounded Jacobite officers had taken refuge. They'd crossed the carnage of the field together, bleeding, frozen, stumbling ... helping one another, dragging one another to a temporary—and totally illusory—safety.

He'd felt the whole of it an illusion. Had waked on the field, convinced he was dead, relieved it was over, the pain, the heartbreak, the struggle. Then had truly waked, to find Jack Randall lying dead on top of him, the captain's dead weight having cut off circulation to his wounded leg and saved him from bleeding to death—one final ill turn, one last indignity.

His friends had found him, forced him to his feet, brought him to the cottage. He hadn't protested; he'd seen what was left of his leg and knew it wouldn't be long.

Longer than he'd thought; it had been two days of pain and fever. Then Melton had come, and his friends had been taken out and shot, one by one. He'd been sent home, to Lallybroch.

He looked at Harold, Lord Melton—now Duke of Pardloe—with no great friendliness.

"I mind ye."



Pardloe rose from the desk and, with a twitch of the shoulder, summoned him to a pair of wing chairs near the hearth, motioning him into one. Jamie lowered himself gingerly onto the pink-striped satin damask, but the thing was sturdily built and bore his weight without creaking.

The duke turned toward the open door to the library and bellowed, "Pilcock! Where the devil are you?"

It wasn't a footman or butler who appeared, though. The woman whose face he had glimpsed in the hall downstairs came in, skirts whispering. He had a much better look at her face now and thought his heart might stop.

"Pilcock's busy," she told the duke. "What do you want?" She was visibly older but still pretty, with a soft flush to her cheeks.

"Busy? Doing what?"

"I sent him up to the attics," the woman replied composedly. "If you're sending poor John to Ireland, he'll need a portmanteau, at least." She gave Jamie the briefest of glances before her gaze flicked back to the duke, and Jamie saw one neat eyebrow arch in question.

Jesus. They're married, then, he thought, seeing the instant communication in the gesture and the duke's grimace of acknowledgment. She's his wife. The green-printed wallpaper behind the duke suddenly began to flicker, and the sides of his jaws went cold. With a remote sense of shock, he realized that he was about to faint.

The duke uttered an exclamation and the woman swung round toward him. Spots flickered and grew thick before his eyes, but not thick enough that he failed to see the expression on her face. Alarm—and warning.

"Are you quite well, Mr. Fraser?" The duke's cool voice penetrated through the buzzing in his ears, and he felt a hand on the back of his neck, forcing his head down. "Put your head between your knees. Minnie, my dear—"

"I've got it. Here." The woman's voice was breathless, and he heard the clink of glass, smelled the hot scent of brandy.

"Not that, not yet. My snuffbox—it's on the mantelpiece." The duke was holding him by the shoulders, he realized, bracing him to keep him from falling. The blood was slowly coming back into his head, but his vision was still dark and

his face and fingers cold.

The sound of quick light footsteps came to him—hearing was always the last sense to go, he thought dimly—clicking on the parquet, muffled on the rug, a pause, then coming swiftly back. An urgent murmur from the duke, another click, a small, soft *pop!* and the stinging rush of ammonia shot up his nose.

He gasped and jerked, trying to turn away, but a firm hand held his head, obliging him to breathe, then finally let go and allowed him to sit up, coughing and spluttering, eyes watering so badly that he could barely make out the woman's form hovering over him, the vial of smelling salts in her hand.

"Poor man," she said. "You must be half dead with travel, and hungry, to boot—it's past teatime, and I'll wager you've not had a bite in hours. Really, Hal—"

"I sent for food. I was just about to send again when he turned white and keeled over," the duke protested, indignant.

"Well, go and tell Cook, then," his wife ordered. "I'll give Mr...." She turned toward Jamie, expectant.

"Fraser," Jamie managed, wiping his streaming face on his sleeve. "James Fraser." The name felt strange on his lips; he hadn't spoken it in years.

"Yes, of course. I'll give Mr. Fraser some brandy. Tell Cook we want sandwiches and cake and a pot of strong hot tea, and we want it quickly."

The duke said something vulgar in French, but went. The woman had a cup of brandy ready and held it to his lips. He took it from her, though, and looked at her over the rim.

The soft flush had gone from her cheeks. She was pale, and her gentle lips were pressed in a grim line.

"For the sake of the cause we once shared," she said very quietly, "I pray you, say nothing. Not yet."



He was deeply embarrassed—and even more deeply unsettled. He'd fainted before, from pain or shock. But not often, and not in front of an enemy. Now here he sat, drinking tea from a porcelain cup with a gold rim, sharing sandwiches and cakes from a similarly adorned platter, with that very enemy. He was confused, annoyed, and at a considerable disadvantage. He didn't like it.

On the other hand, the food was excellent and he was, in fact, starved. His wame had been clenched in a ball since they came in sight of London, so he'd taken no breakfast.

To his credit, Pardloe made no move to take advantage of his guest's weakness. He said nothing beyond an occasional "More ham?" or "Pass the mustard, if you please," and ate in the businesslike manner of a soldier, not seeking Jamie's eye but not avoiding it, either.

The woman had left without another word and hadn't come back. That was one thing to be thankful for.

He'd known her as Mina Rennie; God knew what her real name was. She'd been the seventeen-year-old daughter of a bookseller in Paris who dealt in information and more than once had carried messages between her father and Jamie, during his days of intrigue there before the Rising. Paris seemed as distant as the planet Jupiter. The distance between a young spy and a duchess seemed even greater.

"For the sake of the cause we once shared." Had they? He'd been under no illusions about old Rennie; his only loyalty had been to gold. Had his daughter really considered herself a Jacobite? He ate a slice of cake, absently enjoying the crunch of walnuts and the richly exotic taste of cocoa. He hadn't tasted chocolate since Paris.

He supposed it was possible. The Cause had attracted people of romantic temperament; doomed causes usually did. That made him think abruptly of Quinn, and the thought raised the hairs on his forearms. Christ. He'd nearly forgotten the bloody Irishman and his harebrained schemes, in the alarms of the last few days. What would Quinn think, hearing he'd been dragged off by English soldiers?

Well, he could do nothing about either Quinn or the Duchess of Pardloe just now. One thing at a time. He drained his cup, leaned forward, and set it on its saucer with a deliberate clink that indicated he was now ready to talk.

The duke likewise put down his cup, wiped his mouth with a napkin, and said without preamble, "Do you consider yourself in my debt, Mr. Fraser?"

"No," he said, without hesitation. "I didna ask ye to save my life."

"No, you didn't," Pardloe said dryly. "In fact, you demanded that I shoot you, if my recollection is correct."

"It is."

"Do you hold it against me that I didn't?" It was asked seriously, and Jamie answered it the same way.

"I did. But I don't now, no."

Pardloe nodded.

"Well, then." He held up both hands and folded down one thumb. "You spared my brother's life." The other thumb folded. "I spared yours." An index finger. "You objected to this action." The other index finger. "But have upon consideration withdrawn your objection?" He raised both eyebrows, and Jamie quelled a reluctant impulse to smile. He inclined his head half an inch instead, and Pardloe nodded, lowering his hands.

"So you agree that there is no debt between us? No lingering sense of injury?"

"I wouldna go that far," Jamie replied, very dry indeed. "Ye've got three fingers left. But there's nay debt, no. Not between us."

The man was sharp; he caught the faint emphasis on "us." "Whatever disagreements you may have with my brother

do not concern me," Pardloe said. "So long as they don't interfere with the business I am about to lay before you."

Jamie wondered just what John Grey had told his brother concerning the disagreements between them—but if it wasn't Pardloe's concern, it wasn't his, either.

"Speak, then," he said, and felt a sudden knotting in his belly. They were the same words he'd said to John Grey, which had unleashed that final disastrous conversation. He had a strong foreboding that this one wasn't going to end well, either.

Pardloe took a deep breath, as though readying himself for something, then stood up.

"Come with me."



They went to a small study down the hall. Unlike the gracious library they had just left, the study was dark, cramped, and littered with books, papers, small random objects, and a scatter of ratty quills that looked as if they'd been chewed. Clearly, this was the duke's personal lair, and no servant's intrusion was often tolerated. Tidy himself by default rather than inclination, Jamie found the place oddly appealing.

Pardloe gestured briefly at a chair, then bent to unlock the lower drawer of the desk. What could be sufficiently delicate or important that it required such precautions?

The duke withdrew a bundle of papers bound with ribbon, untied it, and, pushing things impatiently aside to make a clear space, laid a single sheet of paper on the desk in front of Jamie.

He frowned a bit, picked up the sheet, and, tilting it toward the small window for a better light, read slowly through it.

"Can you read it?" The duke was looking at him, intent.

"More or less, aye." He set it down, baffled, and looked at the duke. "Ye want to know what it says, is that it?"

"It is. Is it Erse? The speech of the Scottish Highlands?" Jamie shook his head.

"Nay, though something close. It's *Gaeilge*. Irish. Some call that Erse, too," he added, with a tinge of contempt for ignorance.

"Irish! You're sure?" The duke stood up, his lean face positively eager.

"Yes. I wouldna claim to be fluent, but it's close enough to the *Gàidhlig*—that would be my own tongue," he said pointedly, "that I can follow it. It's a poem—or part o' one."

Pardloe's face went blank for an instant but then resumed its expression of concentration.

"What poem? What does it say?"

Jamie rubbed a forefinger slowly down the bridge of his nose, scanning the page.

"It's no a particular poem—not a proper one, wi' a name to it, I mean—or not one I know. But it's a tale o' the Wild Hunt. Ken that, do ye?"

The duke's face was a study.

"The Wild Hunt?" he said carefully. "I ... have heard of it. In Germany. Not Ireland."

Jamie shrugged, and pushed the page away. The little study had a faintly familiar smell to it—a sweet fuggy aroma that made him want to cough.

"Do ye not find ghost stories everywhere? Or faerie tales?"

"Ghosts?" Pardloe glanced at the page, frowning, then picked it up, scowling as though he'd force it to talk to him.

Jamie waited, wondering whether this sheet of Irish poetry had aught to do with what the woman had said. "If you're sending poor John to Ireland ..." John Grey might go to the devil with his blessing, let alone Ireland, but what with the memory of Quinn and his schemes lurking in his mind, the repeated mention of the place was beginning to give Jamie

Fraser the creeps.

Pardloe suddenly crumpled the paper in his hand and threw the resulting ball at the wall with a rude exclamation in Greek.

"And what has that to do with Siverly?" he demanded, glaring at Jamie.

"Siverly?" he replied, startled. "Who, Gerald Siverly?" Then could have bitten his tongue, as he saw the duke's face change yet again.

"You do know him," Pardloe said. He spoke quietly, as a hunter might do to a companion, sighting game.

There was little point in denying it. Jamie lifted one shoulder.

"I kent a man by that name once, aye. What of it?"

The duke leaned back, eyeing Jamie. "What, indeed. Will you tell me the circumstances in which you knew a Gerald Siverly?"

Jamie considered whether to answer or not. But he owed Siverly nothing, and it was perhaps over-early to be obstructive, given that he had no idea why Pardloe had brought him here. He might need to be offensive later, but no point in it now. And the duke *had* fed him.

As though the duke had picked up this thought, he reached into a cupboard and withdrew a stout brown bottle and a couple of worn pewter cups.

"It's not a bribe," he said, setting these on the desk with a fleeting smile. "I can't keep my temper about Siverly without the aid of a drink, and drinking in front of someone who's not makes me feel like a sot."

Recalling the effect of wine after long abstinence, Jamie had some reservations regarding whisky—he could smell it, the instant the bottle was uncorked—but nodded, nonetheless.

"Siverly," he said slowly, picking up the cup. And how did ye ken I knew him, I wonder? The answer to that came as quickly as the question. Mina Rennie, otherwise known as the Duchess of Pardloe. He pushed the thought aside for the moment, slowly inhaling the sweet fierce fumes of the drink.

"The man I kent wasna a real Irishman, though he'd some land in Ireland, and I think his mother was maybe Irish. He was a friend of O'Sullivan, him who was later quartermaster for ... Charles Stuart."

Pardloe looked sharply at him, having caught the hesitation—he'd nearly said "Prince Charles"—but nodded at him to continue. "Jacobite connections," Pardloe observed. "Yet not a Jacobite himself?"

Jamie shook his head and took a cautious sip. It burned the back of his throat and sent tendrils swirling down through his body like a drop of ink in water. Oh, God. Maybe this was worth being dragged off like a convict. Then again ...

"He dabbled. Dined at Stuart's table in Paris quite often, and ye'd see him out with O'Sullivan or one o' the prince's other Irish friends—but that's as far as it went. I met him once in Lord George Murray's company at a salon, but he kept well apart from Mar or Tullibardine." He had a moment's pang at thought of the small, cheerful Earl of Tullibardine, who, like his own grandfather, had been executed on Tower Hill after the Rising. He lifted his cup in silent salute and drank before going on. "But then he was gone. Frightened off, thought better, saw nay profit—I hadn't enough to do wi' him myself to say why. But he wasna with Charles Stuart at Glenfinnan, nor after."

He took another sip. He wasn't liking this; the memories of the Rising were too vivid. He felt Claire there by his elbow, was afraid to turn his head and look.

"Saw no profit," the duke echoed. "No, I daresay he didn't." He sounded bitter. He sat looking into his cup for a moment, then tossed the rest back, made a houghing noise, set it down, and reached for the bundle of papers.

"Read that. If you will," he added, the courtesy clearly an afterthought.

Jamie glanced at the papers, feeling an obscure sense of unease. But again, there was no reason to refuse, and, despite his reluctance, he picked up the top few sheets and began to read.

The duke wasn't a man who seemed comfortable sitting still. He twitched, coughed, got up and lit the candle, sat down again ... coughed harder. Jamie sighed, concentrating against the distraction.

Siverly seemed to have made the most of his army career in Canada. While Jamie disapproved of the man's behavior on general principles and admired the eloquent passion displayed by the man who had written about it, he felt no personal animus. When he came to the part about the pillaging and terrorizing of the *habitant* villages, though, he felt the blood begin to rise behind his eyes. Siverly might be a proper villain, but this wasn't personal villainy.

This was the Crown's way. The way of dealing with resistant natives. Theft, rape, murder ... and fire.

Cumberland had done it, "cleansing" the Highlands after Culloden. And James Wolfe had done it, too—to deprive the Citadel at Quebec of support from the countryside. Taken livestock, killed the men, burned houses ... and left the women to starve and freeze.

God, that she might be safe! he thought in sudden agony, closing his eyes for an instant. And the child with her.

He glanced up from the paper. The duke was still coughing but had now dug a pipe out of the midden and was packing it with tobacco. Lord Melton had commanded troops at Culloden. Those troops—and the man who sat before him—had very likely remained to take part in the cleansing of the Highlands.

"No lingering sense of injury," he'd said. Jamie muttered something very rude under his breath in the Gàidhlig and

went on reading, though he found his attention still distracted.

Blood pressure. That's what Claire called it. To do with how hard your heart beat and the force with which it drove the blood round your body. When your heart failed you and blood no longer reached the brain, that's what caused fainting, she said. And when it beat hard, in the grip of fear or passion, that was when you felt the blood beat in your temples and swell in your chest, ready for bed or battle.

His own blood pressure was rising like a rocket, and he'd no desire to bed Pardloe.

The duke took a spill from a pottery dish and put it to the candle flame, then used it to light his pipe. It had grown dark outside, and the smell of oncoming rain came in through the half-open window, mingling with the musky sweet scent of the tobacco. Pardloe's lean cheeks hollowed as he sucked at the pipe, the orbits of his eyes shadowed by the light that fell on brow and nose. He looked like a skull.

Abruptly, Jamie set down the papers.

"What do you want of me?" he demanded.

Pardloe took the pipe from his mouth and exhaled slow wisps of smoke.

"I want you to translate that bit of Irish. And to tell me more—whatever you know or recall of Gerald Siverly's background and connections. Beyond that ..." The pipe was in danger of going out, and the duke took a long pull at it.

"And ye think I'll do it, for the asking?"

Pardloe gave him a level look, smoke purling from his lips.

"Yes, I do. Why not?" He raised the middle finger of one hand. "I would consider it a debt, to be paid."

"Put that bloody finger back down before I ram it up your backside."

The duke's mouth twitched, but he put the finger down without comment.

"I also wished to see you, to determine whether you might

be of assistance in bringing Major Siverly to justice. I think that you can be. And what I want above all is justice."

Justice.

Jamie drew a breath and held it for a moment, to ensure against hasty speech.

"What assistance?"

The duke blew a thoughtful cloud of blue-tinged smoke, and Jamie realized suddenly what the sweet, pungent odor was. It wasn't tobacco; the duke was drinking hemp smoke. He'd smelled it once or twice before; a doctor in Paris had prescribed it to an acquaintance who suffered from a lung complaint. Was the duke ill? He didn't look it.

He didn't sound like it, either.

"Siverly has taken leave from his regiment and disappeared. We think he has gone to his estate in Ireland. I want him found and brought back." Pardloe's voice was level, and so was his gaze. "My brother is going to Ireland on this mission, but he will require help. He—"

"Did he bloody tell you to fetch me here?" Jamie's fists had doubled. "Does he think that I—"

"I don't know what he thinks, and, no, he has no idea that I've brought you here," Pardloe said. "I doubt he'll be pleased," he added thoughtfully, "but as I said—whatever disagreements you and he may have do not concern me." He laid the pipe aside and folded his hands, looking at Jamie straight on.

"I dislike doing this," he said. "And I regret the necessity."

Jamie stared at Pardloe, feeling his chest tighten. "I've been fucked up the arse by an Englishman before," he said flatly. "Spare me the kiss, aye?"

Pardloe drew breath through his nose and laid both hands flat on the desk.

"You will accompany Lieutenant-Colonel Grey to Ireland and there render him every assistance in locating Major Siverly and compelling his return to England, as well as obtaining evidence to aid in his prosecution."

Jamie sat like stone. He could hear the rasp of his own breath.

"Or your parole will be revoked. You will be taken to the Tower—today—and there committed to imprisonment at His Majesty's pleasure." The duke paused. "Do you require a moment to consider the situation?" he asked politely.

Jamie stood up abruptly. Pardloe stiffened, barely saving himself from jerking backward.

"When?" Jamie asked, and was surprised at the calmness in his voice.

Pardloe's shoulders relaxed, almost imperceptibly.

"In a few days." For the first time, his eyes left Jamie's face, surveying him from head to toe. "You'll need clothes. You'll travel as the gentleman you are. Under parole, of course." He paused, gaze returning to Jamie's face. "And I will consider myself in your debt, Mr. Fraser."

Jamie looked at him with contempt and turned on his heel.

"Where are you going?" Pardloe said. He sounded startled.

"Out," Jamie said, and reached for the doorknob. He glared back over his shoulder. "Under parole. Of course." He jerked the door open.

"Supper's at eight," said the duke's voice behind him. "Don't be late, will you? It puts Cook out."



Eros Rising

It had come on to rain, and the gutters were streaming. John Grey was soaked to the skin and was steaming. He stamped down Monmouth Street, oblivious to pelting rain, ankle-deep puddles, and the soggy skirts of his coat flapping about his thighs.

He'd been walking for what seemed hours, thinking that the exercise would burn away his anger, make it possible for him to speak to his brother without striking him. It hadn't. If anything, he grew more infuriated with each step.

Even for Hal, to whom high-handedness was as natural as breathing, this was raw. Not only to have ignored John's plainly stated position with regard to Jamie Fraser but to have decided without a word or a by-your-leave to have Fraser brought to London—and to have bloody done it without a word to him, overriding his authority as Fraser's legal parole officer ... and then—then!—to have compounded the crime by informing John—not asking him, oh, no, commanding him!—to go to Ireland in Fraser's company.... He wanted urgently to wring Hal's neck.

The only thing stopping him was the presence of James Fraser at Argus House.

He couldn't in justice blame Fraser for the present situation. He doubted the man was any happier about it than he was. Justice, however, had nothing to do with his feelings, which were exigent.

The rain turned briefly to hail, tiny balls of ice bouncing off his head and shoulders, and a covey of orange-girls scuttled past him, squealing in a mix of consternation and exhilaration, leaving a delicious scent of chilled oranges in their wake. One of them had dropped a fruit from her box; it rolled at his feet, vivid on the pavement, and he picked it up and turned to call after her, but the girls had gone.

The cold globular feel of the orange was pleasant in his hand, and the slackening hail had cooled his blood a little. He tossed the fruit in the air and caught it again.

He hadn't tried to strike Hal in anger since he was fifteen. It hadn't gone well. He could probably do it now, though. Hal was still quick and an excellent swordsman, but he was nearly forty now, and the years of campaigning had told on him. Still, what would be the point of hammering his brother, or even pegging him with an orange at short range? The situation would still be what it was. He put the orange in his pocket and sloshed moodily across a flooded street, kicking floating cabbage leaves out of the way.

"Lord John!" The shrill hail made him look up, in time to be deluged by a massive wave of filthy water thrown up by the wheels of a carriage. Spluttering, he wiped mud and offal from his face and saw a young woman in the window of the coach, her own face convulsed with laughter.

"Oh, your lordship—how wet ye are!" she managed through her giggles, shielding the red velvet flowers on her very stylish hat from the blowing rain with a spread fan.

"Yes. I am wet," he said, giving Nessie a marked look. Agnes, she was called; a young Scottish whore he'd met three years before. Apparently, she'd come up in the world considerably since. "Is that your coach?"

"Och, no," she said with regret. "If it was, I'd offer ye a ride. I'm on my way to see a new swell; he sent it for me."

"Well, I shouldn't like to spoil your client's upholstery," he

said, with exquisite politeness.

"Ye'll catch your death standin' there," she advised him, ignoring this. "But ye're no far from my new house. The end o' Brydges Street. If ye go there, Mrs. Donoghue will gie ye a wee dram against the chill. And maybe a towel," she added, surveying him critically.

"I thank you for the suggestion, madam."

She flashed him a brilliant smile and waggled her fan.

"Nay charge. Get on wi' ye, then, ye stocious bugger, before I'm drowned!" she shouted toward the coachman, and, withdrawing her head, promptly snapped the window shut.

He leapt back but not quite in time to avoid receiving another discharge of cold water and wet manure across his legs as the coach surged into motion.

He stood still, dripping and breathing heavily, but then realized that there was some virtue in Nessie's suggestion. He should seek shelter, if he didn't want to die of pleurisy or come down with *la grippe*. And the only thing worse than going to Ireland in Jamie Fraser's company would be doing it with a bad head cold.

Not at a brothel, where the dram and towel would doubtless be provided at extortionate charge, and unwanted female companionship urged upon him, as well. His encounter with Nessie had jolted him out of his bad temper and into an awareness of his surroundings, though; he was no more than a few streets away from the Beefsteak, his favorite club. He could get a room there—dry clothes, perhaps a bath. And certainly a drink.

He turned and set off up Coptic Street with determination, trickles of water running down his back.



An hour later, bathed, dressed in dry—if slightly too large—

clothing, and having ingested two large brandies, he found himself in a slightly more philosophical frame of mind.

The important thing was to find Siverly and bring him back. His own honor was at stake in that venture, both because of his promise to Charlie Carruthers and because of his duty as an officer of His Majesty's army. He'd done unpleasant things before in pursuit of that duty. This would be one more, that's all.

And it was somewhat reassuring to realize that Fraser would be as uncomfortable as himself. No doubt that discomfort would prevent anything awkward being said.

He thought the philosophical frame of mind was coming along fairly well but might be further assisted by food; agitated by his conversation with Hal, he'd missed his tea and was feeling the effects of brandy on an empty stomach. Glancing at himself in the looking glass to be sure he'd got all the manure flakes out of his still-damp hair, he twitched the ill-fitting gray coat into better adjustment and made his way downstairs.

It was early evening, and the Beefsteak was quiet. Supper was not being served quite yet; there was no one in the smoking room and only one member in the library, sprawled asleep in a chair with a newspaper over his face.

Someone was in the writing room, though, shoulders hunched in thought, quill twiddling in one hand in search of inspiration.

To Grey's surprise, the hunched back proved to belong to Harry Quarry, senior colonel of the 46th. Quarry, straightening up with an unfocused look in his eye, suddenly caught sight of Grey in the corridor and, alarmed, hastily slapped a sheet of blotting paper over the paper on the desk before him.

"A new poem, Harry?" Grey asked pleasantly, stepping into the writing room.

"What?" Harry tried—and failed utterly—to look

innocently bewildered. "Poetry? Me? Letter to a lady." "Oh, yes?"

Grey made as though to lift the blotting paper, and Quarry snatched both sheets away, pressing them to his chest.

"How dare you, sir?" he said, with what dignity he could muster. "A man's private correspondence is sacred!"

"Nothing is sacred to a man who would rhyme 'sanguineous' and 'cunnilingus,' I assure you."

He likely wouldn't have said it had the brandy warming his blood not loosened his tongue, as well. Seeing Harry's eyes bulge, though, he wanted to laugh, in spite of his regret.

Harry leapt to his feet and, going to the door, glanced wildly up and down the corridor, before turning to glare at Grey.

"I should like to see you do better. Who the devil told you?"

"How many people know?" Grey countered. "I guessed. You gave me that book for Diderot, after all." He hadn't guessed but didn't want to reveal the source of his information, that being his mother.

"You read it?" The color was beginning to come back into Harry's normally florid face.

"Well, no," Grey admitted. "Monsieur Diderot read a number of selections from it aloud, though." He grinned involuntarily at the recollection of M. Diderot—very intoxicated—declaiming poetry from Harry's anonymously published *Certain Verses Upon the Subject of Eros* while urinating behind a screen in Lady Jonas's salon.

Harry was examining him, narrow-eyed.

"Hmmph," he said. "You wouldn't know a dactyl from your left thumb. Benedicta told you."

Grey's eyebrows shot up. Not in offense at Harry's impugning of his literary judgment—which was more or less true—but in surprise. For Harry to have referred to Grey's mother by her Christian name—while revealing that she

knew about the poetry—was a shocking revelation as to the intimacy of their acquaintance.

He had wondered how his mother had come to know that Harry wrote erotic poetry. He returned the narrow look, with interest.

Harry, belatedly realizing what he'd given away, looked as innocent as it was possible for a thirty-eight-year-old colonel of expansive habit, lecherous appetite, and considerable experience to look. Grey debated briefly whether to make something of that look, but, after all, his mother was safely married now to General Stanley, and neither she nor the general would thank him for causing scandal—and he really didn't want to call Harry out, anyway.

He settled for saying repressively, "The lady is my mother, sir," and Harry had the grace to look abashed.

Before more could be said, though, the front door opened and a cold draft swirled down the hall, lifting the papers on the desk and scattering them at Grey's feet. He stooped swiftly to pick them up before Harry could reach them.

"Christ, Harry!" His eye flickered hastily over the careful script.

"Give that back!" Harry growled, making a snatch at the paper.

Holding Harry off with one hand, he read further, out loud: "With thighs bedew'd and foaming cunt—Jesus, Harry, foaming?"

"It's a bloody rough draft!"

"Oh, it's rough, all right!" He stepped nimbly backward into the hall, evading Harry's grasp, and collided heavily with a gentleman who had just come in.

"Lord John! I do beg your pardon most humbly! Are you injured?"

Grey blinked stupidly for a moment at the enormous fair man looming solicitously over him, then straightened up from his ignominious collapse against the paneling. "Von Namtzen!" He clasped the big Hanoverian's hand, absurdly delighted to see him again. "What brings you to London? What brings you here? Come and have supper with me, can you?"

Captain von Namtzen's sternly handsome face was wreathed in smiles, though Grey saw that it bore the marks of some recent difficulty, the lines between nose and mouth harsher than they had been, hollows beneath the broad cheekbones and the deep-set eyes. He squeezed Grey's hand to express his pleasure at their reacquaintance, and Grey felt a few bones give, though nothing actually cracked.

"I should be so pleased," von Namtzen said. "But I am engaged ..." He turned, looking vaguely behind him and gesturing toward a well-dressed gentleman who had been standing out of range. "You know Mr. Frobisher? His lordship John Grey," he explained to Frobisher, who bowed.

"Certainly," the gentleman replied courteously. "It would give me great pleasure, Lord John, was you to join us. I have two brace of partridge ordered, a fresh-caught salmon, and a vast great trifle to follow—Captain von Namtzen and I will be quite unequal to the occasion, I am sure."

Grey, with some experience of von Namtzen's capacities, rather thought that the Hanoverian was likely to engulf the entire meal single-handedly and then require a quick snack before retiring, but before he could excuse himself, Harry snatched the kidnapped papers from his hand, thus requiring an introduction to Frobisher and von Namtzen, and in the social muddle that ensued, all four found themselves going in to supper together, with a salmagundi and a few bottles of good Burgundy hastily ordered to augment the meal.



Christ, it was catching. He'd led the conversation over the soup to the subject of poetry, meaning only to chaff Harry,

but it had led to an enthusiastic declamation of a poem from Brockes's *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*—in German—by Mr. Frobisher, and then a heated discussion between von Namtzen and Frobisher regarding the structure of a particular German verse form and whether this was or was not the parent of the English sonnet.

Harry, asked for his opinion, grinned at Grey over his soup spoon.

"Me?" he said blandly. "Oh, I'm certainly not qualified to give an opinion. 'Mary had a little lamb' is about as far as I go in that direction. Grey, now, he's the lad for rhymes; best ask him."

Grey had hurriedly disclaimed any such knowledge, but it had set the table to the game of finding rhymes, going in turn until one man should not be able to find a rhyming word, whereat the next would choose a new one.

They'd got from the simple things like moon/June/spoon/spittoon/poltroon onto the more delicate issue of whether "porringer" could be legitimately rhymed with "oranger," the latter being arguably a real word. The worst of it was that the conversation—coupled with the sight of von Namtzen sitting opposite him, his broad face lightened a little by the wordplay, his soft fair hair curling gently round the back of his ears—had caused him to start rhyming things privately. Only rude words, to start with, but then a little couplet—he thought that was the right term for it—had begun to chant itself.

He was startled by it. Was this how Harry did it? Just have words show up and start something, all by themselves?

The words that had shown up in his own mind had fallen into an irritating bit of doggerel: You cannot master me / but shall I your master be?

This unsettled him, as there was nothing in his relationship—or feelings—regarding von Namtzen to which this could apply, and he realized quite well that it had to do with the

presence of Jamie Fraser at Argus House.

Will you bloody go away? he thought fiercely. I'm not ready.

The room seemed very warm, and sweat gathered round his hairline. Luckily, the arrival of the salmagundi and the kerfuffle of serving it diverted the company's attention from verse, and he lost himself thankfully in the glories of shortcrust pastry and the luscious mingled juices of game, duck, and truffles.



"What's brought you to London, sir?" Harry asked von Namtzen over the salad. It was plainly meant merely to break the digestive silence caused by the salmagundi, but the Hanoverian's face became shadowed, and he looked down into the plate of greens and vinegar.

"I am purchasing some properties for the captain," Mr. Frobisher put in hurriedly, with a glance at von Namtzen. "Papers to sign, you know ..." He waved a hand, indicating vast reams of legal requirement.

Grey looked curiously at von Namtzen—who was not only captain of his own regiment but the Graf von Erdberg, as well. He knew perfectly well that the graf had a man of business in England; all wealthy foreigners did, and he had in fact met von Namtzen's property agent once.

Whether von Namtzen had noticed his curiosity or merely felt that more explanation was necessary, he raised his head and expelled an explosive breath.

"My wife died," he said, and paused to swallow. "Last month. I—my sister is in London." Another swallow. "I have brought the ... my children ... to her."

"Oh, my dear sir," said Harry, putting a hand on von Namtzen's arm and speaking with the deepest sympathy. "I am so sorry."

"Danke," von Namtzen muttered, and then suddenly rose

to his feet and blundered out of the room, with what might have been a word of excuse or a muffled sob.

"Oh, dear," said Frobisher, dismayed. "Poor fellow. I'd no idea he felt it so deeply."

Neither had Grey.

After an awkward pause, they resumed eating their salads, Grey gesturing to the steward to remove von Namtzen's plate. Frobisher had no details regarding the captain's sad loss, and the conversation switched to a desultory discussion of politics.

Grey, having less than no interest in the subject, was left to consider Stephan von Namtzen and supply automatic noises of interest or agreement as the rhythm of the talk demanded.

He did spare a thought for Louisa von Lowenstein, the extremely vivacious—not that he couldn't think of better words, but the woman was dead—Saxon princess who had married von Namtzen three years before. God rest her soul, he thought, and meant it—but his real concern was for Stephan.

If asked, he would have sworn that the marriage had been one of mutual convenience. He would also have sworn that Stephan's tastes lay in other directions. There had been passages between himself and von Namtzen that ... well, true, there had been nothing explicit, no declarations—not that sort of declaration, at least—and yet he couldn't have been altogether mistaken. The sense of feeling between them ...

He recalled the evening in Germany when he had helped Stephan to remove his shirt outdoors, had examined—and kissed—the stump of his recently amputated left arm, and how the man's skin had glowed in the magic of the dusky light. His face grew hot and he bent his head over his plate.

Still. Stephan might have been sincerely attached to Louisa, no matter what the true nature of their marriage had been. And there were men who enjoyed the physical attractions of both sexes. For that matter, Grey himself knew several women whose deaths would distress him greatly, though he had no relation with them beyond that of friendship.

Von Namtzen reappeared as the cheese plates were being taken away, his normal equanimity seeming quite restored, though his eyes were red-rimmed. The conversation over port and brandy changed smoothly to a discussion of horse racing, thence to the breeding of horses—von Namtzen had a remarkable stud at Waldesruh—and remained on purely neutral matters until they rose at last.

"Shall I see you home?" Grey said quietly to von Namtzen as they waited in the hall for the steward to bring their cloaks. His heart was thumping audibly in his ears.

Stephan's eyes flicked toward Frobisher, but the man was in close conversation with Harry about something.

"I should appreciate your company very much, Lord John," he said, and though the words were formal, his bloodshot eyes were warm.

They didn't speak in the coach. The rain had ceased and they left the windows down, the air cold and fresh on their faces. Grey's thoughts were disordered by the amount of wine drunk with dinner, more so by the tumultuous emotions of the day—and, most of all, by Stephan's close presence. He was a large man, and his knee vibrated with the coach's movement, no more than an inch from Grey's.

As he followed Stephan from the coach, he caught the scent of von Namtzen's cologne, something faint and spicy—cloves, he thought, and was absurdly reminded of Christmas, and oranges studded thick with cloves, the smell festive in the house.

His hand closed on the orange, cool and round in his pocket, and he thought of other rounded things that might fit in his hand, these warm.

"Fool," he said to himself, under his breath. "Don't even

think about it."

It was, of course, impossible not to think about it.

Dismissing the yawning butler who let them in, Stephan led Grey to a small sitting room where a banked fire smoldered in the hearth. He waved Grey to a comfortable chair and took up the poker himself to stir the embers into life.

"You will have something to drink?" he asked, with a nod over his shoulder to a sideboard on which glasses and bottles stood in orderly ranks, graded by size. Grey smiled at the Germanic neatness of the array, but poured a small brandy for himself and—with a glance at Stephan's broad back—a slightly larger one for his friend.

Several of the bottles were half empty, and he wondered how long Stephan had been in London.

Seated before the fire, they sipped at their drinks in a companionable silence, watching the flames.

"It was kind of you to come with me," Stephan said at last. "I did not want to be alone tonight."

Grey lifted one shoulder in dismissal. "I am only sorry that it should be tragedy that brings us together again," he said, and meant it. He hesitated. "You ... miss your wife greatly?"

Stephan pursed his lips a little. "I—well ... of course I mourn Louisa," he said, with more formality than Grey would have expected. "She was a fine woman. Very good at managing things." A faint, sad smile touched his lips. "No, it is my poor children for whom I am sorrowful."

The shadow Grey had noted before clouded the broad face, clean-limned as a Teutonic saint's. "Elise and Alexander ... They lost their own mother when they were quite small, and they loved Louisa very much; she was a wonderful mother, as kind to them as to her own son."

"Ah," Grey said. "Siggy?" He'd met young Siegfried, Louisa's son by her first marriage, and smiled at the memory.

"Siggy," von Namtzen agreed, and smiled a little, too, but

the smile soon faded. "He must remain in Lowenstein, of course; he is the heir. And that also is too bad for Lise and Sascha—they are very fond of him, and now he is gone from them, too. It's better for them to be with my sister. I could not leave them at Lowenstein, but their faces when I had to say farewell to them this afternoon ..."

His own face crumpled for a moment, and Grey felt by reflex in his pocket for a handkerchief, but von Namtzen buried his grief in his glass for a moment and got control of himself again.

Grey rose and turned his back tactfully as he refreshed his drink, saying something casual about his cousin Olivia's child, Cromwell, now aged almost two and the terror of the household.

"Cromwell?" von Namtzen said, clearing his throat and sounding bemused. "This is an English name?"

"Couldn't be more so." An explanation of the history of the lord protector carried them into safe waters—though Grey suffered a slight private pang; he couldn't think of young Cromwell without remembering Percy, the stepbrother who had also been his lover. They had both been present—inadvertently—at young Cromwell's birth, and his description of this hair-raising occasion made Stephan laugh.

The house was quiet, and the small room seemed removed from everything, a warm refuge in the depths of the night. He felt as though the two of them were castaways, thrown up together on some island by the storms of life, passing uncharted time by exchanging their stories.

It wasn't the first time. When he had been wounded after Crefeld, he had been taken to Stephan's hunting lodge at Waldesruh to recover, and once he was able to carry on a conversation that lasted more than two sentences, they had often talked like this, late into the night.

"You are feeling well?" Stephan asked suddenly, picking up his train of thought in the way that close friends sometimes do. "Your wounds—do they still pain you?"

"No," he said. He had wounds that still did, but not physical ones. "Und dein Arm?"

Stephan laughed with pleasure at hearing him speak German and lifted the stump of his left arm a little.

"Nein. Eine Unannehmlichkeit, mehr nicht." A nuisance, no more.

He watched Stephan as they talked, now in both languages, seeing the light move on his face, as it went from humor to seriousness and back again, expressions flickering like fire shadow over his broad Teutonic bones. Grey had been startled, as well as moved, by the depth of Stephan's feeling for his children—though, on consideration, he shouldn't have been. He'd long been struck by the apparent contradiction in the Teutonic character, swinging from cold logic and ferocity in battle to the deepest romanticism and sentimentality.

Passion, he supposed you'd call it. Weirdly enough, it reminded him of the Scots, who were emotionally much the same, though less disciplined about it.

Master me, he thought. Or shall I your master be?

And with that casual thought, something moved viscerally in him. Well, it had been moving for some time, in all honesty. But with that particular thought, his attraction to Stephan suddenly merged with the things he had been deliberately not thinking—or feeling—with regard to Jamie Fraser, and he found himself grow flushed, discomfited.

Did he want Stephan only because of the physical similarities between him and Fraser? They were both big men, tall and commanding, both the sort that made people turn to look at them. And to look at either of them stirred him, deeply.

It was quite different, though. Stephan was his friend, his good friend, and Jamie Fraser never would be. Fraser, though, was something that Stephan never could be.

"You are hungry?" Without waiting for an answer, Stephan rose and rummaged in a cupboard, coming out with a plate of biscuits and a pot of orange marmalade.

Grey smiled, remembering his earlier prediction regarding von Namtzen's appetite. He took an almond biscuit from politeness rather than hunger and, with a feeling of affection, watched Stephan devour biscuits spread with marmalade.

The affection was tinged with doubt, though. There was a sense of deep closeness between them, here in the night, quite alone—no doubt at all of that. But what sort of closeness ...?

Stephan's hand brushed his, reaching for a biscuit, and von Namtzen squeezed his fingers lightly, smiling, before letting go and taking up the marmalade spoon. The touch ran up Grey's arm and straight down his spine, raising hairs in its wake.

No, he thought, struggling for logic, for decency. I can't.

It wouldn't be right. Not right to use Stephan, to try to slake his physical need with Stephan, perhaps risk their friendship by trying. And yet the temptation was there, no doubt of that, either. Not only the immediate desire—which was bloody strong—but the ignoble thought that he might by such means exorcise, or at least temper, the hold Fraser had upon him. It would be far easier to face Fraser, to deal with him calmly, if the sense of physical desire was at least muted, if not gone entirely.

But ... he looked at Stephan, the kindness and the sadness in his broad face, and knew he couldn't.

"I must go," he said abruptly, and stood up, brushing crumbs from his shirt ruffle. "It's very late."

"Must you go?" Stephan sounded surprised, but rose, too.

"I—yes. Stephan—I'm so glad we met this evening," he said on impulse, and held out a hand.

Stephan took it, but rather than shake it, drew him close, and the taste of oranges was suddenly in his mouth.



"What are you thinking?" he asked at last, not sure whether he wanted to hear the answer but needing to hear Stephan speak.

To his relief, Stephan smiled, his eyes still closed, and drew his large, warm fingers gently down the slope of Grey's shoulder and over the curve of his forearm, where they curled round his wrist.

"I am wondering what is the risk that I will die before St. Catherine's Day."

"What? Why? And when is St. Catherine's Day?"

"In three weeks. That is when Father Gehring returns from Salzburg."

"Oh, yes?"

Stephan let go of his wrist and opened his eyes.

"If I go back to Hanover and confess this to Father Fenstermacher, I will probably have to hear Mass every day for a year or undertake a pilgrimage to Trier. Father Gehring is somewhat ... less exacting."

"I see. And if you die before making your confession—"

"I will go to hell, of course," Stephan said matter-of-factly. "But I think it is worth the risk. It's a long walk to Trier." He coughed and cleared his throat.

"That—what you did. To me." He wouldn't meet Grey's eye, and a deep color rose across his broad cheekbones.

"I did a lot of things to you, Stephan." Grey struggled to keep the laughter out of his voice, but without much success. "Which one? This one?" He leaned forward on his elbow and kissed von Namtzen's mouth, enjoying the little start von Namtzen gave at the touch of his lips.

Stephan kissed men frequently, in that exuberant German way of his. But he didn't kiss them this way.

To feel the strength of those broad shoulders rise under his palm, then feel them give way, the powerful flesh melting slowly as Stephan's mouth softened, yielding to him ...

"Better than your hundred-year-old brandy," Grey whispered.

Stephan sighed deeply. "I want to give you pleasure," he said simply, meeting Grey's eyes for the first time. "What would you like?"

Grey was speechless. Not so much at the declaration, moving as it was—but at the multitude of images that one sentence conjured. What would he *like*?

"Everything, Stephan," he said, his voice husky. "Anything. It—I mean—to touch you—just to *watch* you gives me pleasure."

Stephan's mouth curled up at that.

"You can watch," he assured Grey. "You will let me touch you, though?"

Grey nodded. "Oh, yes," he said.

"Good. What I wish to know, though—how best?" He reached out and took hold of Grey's half-hard prick, inspecting it critically.

"How?" Grey croaked. All the blood had left his head, very suddenly.

"Ja. Shall I put my mouth upon this? I am not sure what to do then, you see, how this is done correctly. I see there is some skill in this, which I do not have. And you are not quite ready yet, I think?"

Grey opened his mouth to observe that this condition was rapidly adjusting itself, but Stephan went on, squeezing gently.

"It is more straightforward if I put my member into your bottom and use you in that fashion. I am ready, and I am confident I can do that; it is much like what I do with my—with women."

"I—yes, I'm sure you can," Grey said rather faintly.

"But I think if I do that, I might hurt you." Stephan let go of Grey's prick and took hold of his own, frowning at the comparison. "It hurt, at first, when you did this to me. Not later—I liked it very much," he assured Grey hastily. "But at first. And I am ... somewhat large."

Grey's mouth was so dry that it was an effort to speak. "Some ... what," he managed. He glanced at Stephan's prick, freshly erect, then away. Then, slowly, back again, eyes drawn like iron to a magnet.

It would hurt. A lot. At least ... at first ...

He swallowed audibly. "If ... I mean ... if you ..."

"I will do it very slowly, *ja*." Stephan smiled, sudden as the sun coming from behind clouds, and reached for the large cushion they had used earlier. He threw it down and patted it. "Come then, and bend over. I will oil you."

He had taken Stephan from behind, thinking that Stephan would be less self-conscious that way, he himself loving the sight of the broad, smooth back beneath him, the powerful waist and muscular buttocks, surrendered so completely to him. He felt his own clench a little at the memory.

"Not—that way." He pushed the cushion back against the headboard and scrambled up, bracing his shoulders securely against it. "You said I could watch." And the position would give him some control—and at least a chance to avoid serious injury, should Stephan's enthusiasm outrun his caution.

Are you insane? he asked himself, wiping sweating palms against the counterpane. You haven't got to do this, you know. You don't even like to ... God, you'll feel it for a week, even if he doesn't ...

"Oh, Jesus!"

Stephan paused, surprised, in the act of pouring oil into the dish. "I have not even begun. You are all right?" A small frown drew his brows together. "You *have* ... done this before?"

"Yes. Yes, I ... I'm fine. I ... just ... anticipation."
Stephan leaned forward, very gently, and kissed him. He

learned quickly, Stephan did. When he drew back after some time, he looked at Grey's body, visibly trembling despite his efforts to control it, and shook his head, smiling a little. Then he clicked his tongue softly and passed his hand over Grey's hair, once, twice, stroking him. Gentling him.

It was true that Stephan had limited experience, no artifice, and not much natural skill. But Grey had forgotten that Stephan was a horseman, and a breeder and trainer of dogs. He didn't need words to understand what an animal—or a person—was feeling. And he knew what "slowly" meant.



Punch and Judy

Next day

Jamie's chest felt as though he'd a leather strap around it. He hadn't drawn a proper breath since the soldiers had taken him from Helwater, but just this moment he could barely remember how lungs were meant to work. It was a conscious effort to draw breath, and he counted—one, two, in, out, one, two—as he walked. He had a sudden flash of memory, Claire's face, intent, as she knelt by a wee lad—was it Rabbie? aye, Rabbie MacNab—who'd fallen from the hayloft at Lallybroch.

She'd spoken to the lad, calm, one hand on his belly and the other feeling quickly down his limbs for broken bones. "Relax; your breath will come back. Yes, you see? Breathe slowly now, push out as much as you can.... Yes, now in ... one ... two. In ... out ..."

He caught the rhythm of it from the memory of her voice, and within a few steps he was breathing easier, though the back of his neck was wet with cold sweat and gooseflesh still rippled over his shoulders. What was the matter with him?

The duke had summoned him, and he'd walked into the drawing room and found himself face-to-face with Colonel Quarry, looking just as he had when last seen, as the governor of Ardsmuir prison. Whereupon he'd turned on his

heel and walked straight out again, through the front door and into the park, his heart hammering and his face going hot and cold and hot again.

He wiped sweating palms on his breeks and felt the slight roughness of a patch. Someone had taken away his clothes in the night, laundered and mended them.

He wasn't afraid of Quarry; he never had been. But one keek at the man and he'd felt his wame clench and spots dance before his eyes and he'd known it was get out right then or measure his length on the hearth rug at Quarry's feet.

There were trees dotted here and there; he found one and sat down on the grass, leaning back against its trunk. His hands still trembled, but he felt better with something solid at his back. He didn't want to but couldn't keep from rubbing his wrists, first one and then the other, as if to assure himself of what he knew fine—that the fetters were gone.

One of the footmen from Argus House had followed him; he recognized the dark-gray livery. The man hung back, just within the edge of the park, trying to pretend he was watching the carriages and riders that went past on the road that skirted the park. He'd done the same thing the evening before, when Jamie had come out to walk off his anger at the duke.

He hadn't troubled Jamie then and obviously didn't mean to drag him back to the house now; he'd only been sent to watch. It occurred to Jamie to wonder what yon footman would do, should he stand up and run. He had a momentary urge to do just that, and did in fact stand up. He should have run, too, because no sooner had he got to his feet than Tobias Quinn came slithering out of a bush like a toad.

"Well, and there's luck for ye," Quinn remarked, looking pleased. "I thought I should have to lurk about for days, and here Himself walks straight up to me, and me not at the watching for more than half a day!"

"Dinna bloody call me Himself," Jamie said irritably. "What the devil are ye doing here? And why are ye hiding in a bush wearing that?"

Quinn lifted a brow and dusted the yellow of spring catkins fastidiously from the sleeve of his checkered coat. It was pink and black silk, and everyone who passed within twenty yards stared at it.

"Not the greeting one might expect of a friend," he said, reproving. "And I wasn't hiding, not in the least. I was just comin' across the park when I saw ye come out, and I sidled round the bush as being quickest, since I perceived ye were about to fly and I'd have no chance of catching ye if ye did, you with the legs of a veritable stallion, so ye have. As for me plumage"—here he spread his arms and revolved, the skirts of his coat flaring out—"is it not the fine thing of the world?"

"Go away," Jamie said, repressing an urge to shove Quinn back into the bush. He turned and began to walk away. The Irishman came along.

Jamie glanced over his shoulder, but the footman was still turned away, absorbed in an entertainingly profane argument between the drivers of two carriages whose wheels had clashed and locked together as they passed each other too closely.

"The splendid thing about this coat," Quinn said chattily, pulling it off, "is that ye can wear it both ways. Inside out, like, I mean. Should ye want to avoid notice for some reason." He shook the garment, showing off the inner lining, which was a fine wool, seamed smooth and sober black. He reassumed the coat, pulled off his wig, and rubbed a hand through his poll of short curls, making them stand on end. He might have been a lawyer's clerk now, or a Quaker of moderate means.

Jamie didn't know whether it was only the man's love of

the dramatic or whether there was some need of such hasty disguise. He didn't want to know.

"I've told ye," he said, struggling for civility. "I'm no the man for your job."

"Why, because of this small little complication?" Quinn waved a hand carelessly toward the bulk of Argus House, looming gray through the scrim of trees. "It's nothing, sure. I'll have ye in Ireland by the end of next week."

"What?" Jamie stared at him, uncomprehending.

"Well, you'll not want to linger in such company as that, will ye?" Quinn half-turned his head toward Argus House. He turned back, passing a critical eye over Jamie's worn clothes.

"Aye, thus, very well thus. We've to move briskly for a bit, but once into the Rookery, no one would glance twice at you. Ah ... perhaps twice," he amended, squinting up at Jamie's height. "But not three times, surely."

It occurred belatedly to Jamie that Quinn was suggesting that they abscond. Right now.

"I canna do that!"

Quinn looked surprised.

"Why not?"

Jamie's mouth opened but without the slightest notion what might come out.

"We wouldna make it to the edge of the park, for one thing. See you fellow in the gray? He's watching me."

Quinn squinted in the direction indicated. "He's not watchin' ye just this minute," he pointed out. He took Jamie by the hand, pulling. "Come on, then. Walk fast!"

"No!" He jerked loose and cast a wild glance at the footman, willing the man to turn round. He didn't, and Jamie turned back to Quinn, speaking firm again.

"I've told ye once, and I'll say it again. I'll have nothing to do wi' any such crack-brained notion. The Cause is dead, and I've no intent to follow it into the grave. Aye?" Quinn affected not to have heard this, instead looking thoughtfully at Argus House.

"That's the Duke of Pardloe's house, they say," he remarked, scratching his head. "Why did the sojers bring ye here, I wonder?"

"I dinna ken. They didna tell me." This had the virtue of being half true, and he had no compunction about lying to the Irishman in any case.

"Hmm. Well, I'll tell ye, sir, was it me in the hands of the English, I'd not wait to find out."

Jamie had no wish to see Quinn in English hands, either, annoying as the man was.

"Ye should go, Quinn," he said. "It's dangerous."

"Odd, is it not?" Quinn said meditatively, as usual taking no heed. "On the one hand, they snatch ye from Helwater under armed guard and take ye to London without a word. On the other ... they let ye wander about outside? Even with a watcher, that seems unusually trusting. Does it not strike ye that way?"

Why would the bloody footman not turn round?

"I've no idea," he said, unwilling to stand about discussing Pardloe and that gentleman's very individual convictions as to honor. For lack of anything to add to that, he walked away down the nearest path, pursued by the Irishman. At least if the footman ever did turn round, he'd see Jamie gone and start looking for him. At this point, any interruption whatever would be welcome, even if it meant being dragged back in chains.

That casual thought flickered through his mind like sheet lightning, illuminating dark corners. Chains. A dream of chains.

He was paying no attention, either to where he went or to what Quinn was saying, yammering at his side. There was a crowd ahead; he made for it. Surely even Quinn, talkative as a parrot, wouldn't be scheming out loud in the midst of a crowd. He had to shut the man up long enough to figure how to get rid of him.

The dreams. He'd pushed the thought from his mind the instant he saw it. It pushed back, though, strong. That was it. The dreams that took him back to dreadful places, the ones he only half-remembered. He'd had one last night. That was why seeing Quarry suddenly, without warning, had made him like to faint.

Chains, he thought, and knew that if he lingered on that thought for more than an instant, he'd find himself in the dream again, sweating and ill, crouched against a stone wall, unable to lift his hand to wipe the vomit from his beard, the fetters too heavy, the metal hot from his fever, inescapable, eternal captivity ...

"No," he said fiercely, and turned abruptly off the path, coming to a halt in front of a puppet show, surrounded by people, all calling out and laughing. Noise. Color. Anything to fill his senses, to keep the clank of chains at bay.

Quinn was still talking, but Jamie ignored him, affecting to watch the play before them. He'd seen things like this in Paris, often. Wee puppets posturing and squeaking. These were long-nosed, ugly ones, shouting in shrill insult and hitting one another with sticks.

He was breathing easier now, dizziness and fear leaving him as the sheer ordinariness of the day closed round him like warm water. Punchinello—that was the man-puppet's name—and his wife was Judy. She had a stick, Judy did, and tried to strike Punch on the head with it, but he seized the stick. She whipped it up, and Punch, clinging to it, sailed across the tiny stage with a long drawn-out "Shiiiiit!" to crash against the wall. The crowd shrieked with delight.

Willie would like it, and at thought of the boy he felt at once much better and much worse.

He could get rid of Quinn without much trouble; the man couldn't force him to go to Inchcleraun, after all. The Duke of Pardloe was another matter. He could force Jamie to go to Ireland, but at least that venture didn't involve risking his neck or the possibility of lifelong imprisonment. He could do it, finish the job as quickly as possible, and then go back. To Helwater and Willie.

He missed the boy with a sudden pang, wishing he had Willie perched on his shoulders now, grabbing at his ears and giggling at the puppets. Would Willie remember him if he was gone for months?

Well, he'd just have to find Siverly fast. Because he was going back to Helwater.

He could feel the child's imagined weight on his shoulders, warm and heavy, smelling faintly of wee and strawberry jam. There were some chains you wore because you wanted to.



"Where the bloody hell have *you* been?" Hal demanded without preamble. "And what in God's name happened to you?" His eye roamed over Grey's clothes, retrieved from the Beefsteak. The club's steward had done his best, but the overall effect was shrunken, stained, faded, and generally far from fashionable.

"Not that it's any of your business, but I got soaked in the rain and stopped the night with a friend," Grey replied equably. He felt cheerful. Relaxed and solidly at peace. Not even Hal's bad temper or the imminent prospect of meeting Jamie Fraser could disturb him. "And where is our guest?"

Hal drew in a long, exasperated breath.

"He's sitting under a tree in the park."

"What on earth for?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. Harry Quarry came for tea—I was expecting you to be here, by the way"—Hal gave him an eyeball, which he ignored—"and when Fraser came in, he

took one look at Harry and walked straight out of the house without a by-your-leave. I only know where he is because I'd told one of the footmen to follow him if he went out."

"He'll like that, I'm sure," Grey said. "For God's sake, Hal. Harry was governor at Ardsmuir before me; surely you knew that?"

Hal looked irritably blank. "Possibly. So?"

"He put Fraser in irons. For eighteen months—and left him that way when he came back to London."

"Oh." Hal considered that, frowning. "I see. How was I meant to know that, for heaven's sake?"

"Well, you would have," Grey replied crushingly, "if you'd had the common sense to tell me what the devil you were doing, rather than—oh, hallo, Harry. Didn't know you were still here."

"So I gathered. Where did Fraser go?"

Harry looked rather grim, Grey saw. And he was in full uniform. No bloody wonder Fraser had left; he'd likely seen Harry's presence as a calculated insult, an attempt to further impress his own helplessness upon him.

This realization appeared to be dawning on Hal, too.

"Damn, Harry," he said. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you had a history with Fraser."

History, Grey thought. One way of putting it. Just as well he hadn't arrived in time for tea. He'd no idea what James Fraser might have done—confronted simultaneously and without warning by the man who'd put him in fetters, and by the one who'd had him flogged, in addition to the man who was currently blackmailing him—but whatever he might have done, Grey wouldn't have blamed him for doing it.

"I'd asked Harry to come so that we might discuss the Siverly affair and so that Harry could tell you what—and who—he knows in Ireland," Hal went on, turning to Grey. "But I didn't think to tell Harry about Fraser ahead of time."

"Not your fault, old man," Harry said, gruff. He squared

his shoulders and straightened his lapels. "I'd best go and talk to him, hadn't I?"

"And say what, exactly?" Grey asked, out of sheer inability to imagine what could be said in the circumstances.

Harry shrugged. "Offer him satisfaction, if he likes. Don't see that there's much else to be done."

The Grey brothers exchanged a look of perfect comprehension and suppressed horror. The implications of a duel between a regimental colonel and a paroled prisoner in the custody of the colonel of the regiment, putting aside the complete illegality of the proceedings, *and* the very real possibility that one of them might well kill or maim the other ...

"Harry—" Hal began, in measured tones, but John interrupted him.

"I'll be your second, Harry," he said hastily. "If it's necessary. I'll go and ... er ... inquire about the arrangements, shall I?"

Not waiting for an answer, he pulled open the front door and ran down the steps, too fast for any following shouts to reach him. He dodged across Kensington Road, ducking under the nose of an oncoming horse and being roundly cursed by its rider, and stepped into the open precincts of Hyde Park, where he paused, heart hammering, to look around.

Fraser wasn't immediately visible. After yesterday's savage downpour, today had dawned soft and clear, with the kind of pale bright sky that made one long to be a bird. Consequently, there were large numbers of people in the park, families lounging and eating under the trees, couples strolling on the paths, and pickpockets hanging about the fringes of the crowds round the Speakers' Corner and the Punch and Judy in hopes of an unguarded purse.

Ought he to go back and ask which footman had been following Fraser and where he'd last been seen? No, he decided, striding firmly into the park. He wasn't about to give Harry or Hal a chance to interfere; they'd caused quite enough trouble already.

Given Fraser's height and appearance, Grey had no doubt of his ability to pick the Scot out of any crowd. If he'd been sitting under a tree to begin with, he wasn't doing it now. Where would *he* go, he wondered, if he were Fraser? If he'd been living for several years on a horse farm in the Lake District and, prior to that, in a remote Scottish prison?

Right. He turned at once in the direction of the Punch and Judy show and was gratified as he came in sight of it to see a tall, red-haired man at the back of the crowd, easily able to see over the sea of heads and plainly absorbed in the play before him.

didn't pull He want to Fraser away from entertainment, so kept a short distance away. Perhaps the play would put the Scot in better temper—though, hearing the shrieks from the crowd as Judy beat Punch into a cocked hat, he began to feel that the influence of the proceedings might not have quite the calmative effect he'd hoped for. He would himself pay considerable money for the privilege of seeing Fraser beat Hal into a cocked hat, though it would cause complications.

He kept one eye on Fraser, the other on the play. The puppet master, an Irishman, was both adroit with his puppets and inventive with his epithets, and Grey felt an unexpected flash of pleasure at seeing Fraser smile.

He leaned against a tree, a little distance away, enjoying the sense of temporary invisibility. He'd wondered how he'd feel, seeing Jamie Fraser in the flesh again, and was relieved to find that the episode in the stable at Helwater now seemed sufficiently distant that he could put it aside. Not forget it, unfortunately, but not have it be uppermost in his mind, either.

Now Fraser bent his head to one side, listening to

something said to him by a thin, curly-headed man beside him, though without taking his eyes off the stage. The sight of the curls brought Percy briefly to mind, but Percy, too, was in the past, and he shoved the thought firmly down.

He hadn't consciously thought what he'd say or how he might start the conversation, but when the play ended, he found himself upright and walking fast, so as to come onto the path slightly in front of Fraser as he turned back toward the edge of the park.

He had no notion what had led him to do this, to let the Scot make the first move, but it seemed natural, and he heard Fraser snort behind him, a small sound with which he was familiar; it signified something between derision and amusement.

"Good afternoon, Colonel," Fraser said, sounding resigned as he swung into step beside Grey.

"Good afternoon, Captain Fraser," he replied politely, and felt rather than saw Fraser's startled glance at him. "Did you enjoy the show?"

"I thought I'd gauge how long my chain is," Fraser said, ignoring the question. "Within sight o' the house, is it?"

"For the moment," Grey said honestly. "But I did not come to retrieve you. I have a message from Colonel Quarry."

Fraser's wide mouth tightened involuntarily. "Oh, aye?"

"He wishes to offer you satisfaction."

"What?" Fraser stared at him blankly.

"Satisfaction for what injury you may have received at his hands," Grey elaborated. "If you wish to call him out—he'll come."

Fraser stopped dead.

"He's offering to fight a duel with me. Is that what ye're saying?"

"Yes," Grey said patiently. "I am."

"Jesus God." The big Scot stood still, ignoring the flow of pedestrians—all of whom gave him a wide, side-glancing

berth—and rubbing a finger up and down the bridge of his nose. He stopped doing this and shook his head, in the manner of one dislodging flies.

"Quarry canna think ye'd let me. You and His Grace, I mean."

Grey's heart gave a slight jerk; Christ, he was thinking about it. Seriously.

"I personally have nothing to say regarding the matter," he said politely. "As for my brother, he said nothing to me that indicated he would interfere." Since he hadn't had a chance. Christ, what would Hal do if Fraser did call Harry out? Besides kill Grey himself for not preventing it, that is.

Fraser made a thoroughly Scotch sort of noise in his throat. Not quite a growl, but it lifted the hairs on Grey's neck, and for the first time he began to worry that Fraser just might send back a challenge. He hadn't thought—he'd thought Fraser would be startled by the notion, but then ... He swallowed and blurted, "Should you wish to call him out, I will second you."

Whatever Fraser had thought of Quarry's original offer, Grey's startled him a good deal more. He stared at Grey, blue eyes narrowed, looking to see whether this was an ill-timed joke.

Grey's heart was thumping hard enough to cause small sparks of pain on the left side of his chest, even though the wounds there were long since healed. Fraser's hands had curled into fists, and Grey had a sudden, vivid recollection of their last meeting, when Fraser had come within a literal inch of smashing in his face with one of those massive fists.

"Have you ever been out—fought a duel, I mean—before?" "I have," Fraser said shortly.

The color had risen in the Scot's face. He was outwardly immobile, but whatever was going on inside his head was moving fast. Grey watched, fascinated.

That process reached its conclusion, though, and the big

fists relaxed—consciously—and Fraser uttered a short, humorless laugh, his eyes focusing again on Grey.

"Why?" he said.

"Why, what? Why does Colonel Quarry offer you satisfaction? Because his sense of honor demands it, I suppose."

Fraser said something under his breath in what Grey supposed to be Erse. He further supposed it to be a comment on Quarry's honor but didn't inquire. The blue eyes were boring into his.

"Why offer to second me? D'ye dislike Quarry?"

"No," Grey said, startled. "Harry Quarry's one of my best friends."

One thick, ruddy brow went up. "Why would ye not be *his* second, then?"

Grey took a deep breath.

"Well ... actually ... I am. There's nothing in the rules of duello preventing it," he added. "Though I admit it's not usual."

Fraser closed his eyes for an instant, frowning, then opened them again.

"I see," he said, very dry. "So was I to kill him, ye'd be obliged to fight me? And if he killed me, ye'd fight him? And should we kill each other, what then?"

"I suppose I'd call a surgeon to dispose of your bodies and then commit suicide," Grey said, a little testily. "But let us not be rhetorical. You have no intent of calling him out, do you?"

"I'll admit the prospect has its attractions," Fraser said evenly. "But ye may tell Colonel Quarry I decline his offer."

"Do you wish to tell him that yourself? He's still at the house."

Fraser had begun to walk again, but stopped dead at this. His gaze shifted toward Grey in a most uncomfortable way, rather like a large cat making a decision regarding the

edibility of some small animal in its vicinity.

"Um ... if you do not choose to meet him," Grey said carefully, "I will leave you here for a quarter of an hour and make sure that he is gone before you return to the house."

Fraser turned on him with such sudden violence as to make Grey steel himself not to step backward.

"And let the gobshite think I am afraid of him? Damn you, Englishman! Dare ye to suggest such a thing? Were I to call someone out, it would be you, *mhic a diabhail*—and ye know it."

He whirled on his heel and stalked toward the house, scattering loungers like pigeons before him.



They saw him coming; the door opened before Jamie reached the top step, and he walked past the butler with a curt nod. The man looked apprehensive. Surely to God he must be familiar with an atmosphere of violence, Jamie thought, working in this nest of vipers.

He had an overwhelming urge to smash his fist through something and refrained from punching the walnut paneling in the foyer only because he realized just how much it would hurt—and realized also the futility of such action. He also didn't mean to meet Colonel Quarry again dripping blood or otherwise at a social disadvantage.

Where would they be? The library, almost certainly. He stalked round the corner of the hallway and nearly trod on the duchess, who gave a startled squeak.

"Your pardon, Your Grace," he said, with a creditable bow for a man still dressed like a groom.

"Captain Fraser," she said, a hand pressed winsomely to her bosom.

"Christ, you, too?" he said. It was rude, but he'd no patience left.

"Me, too, what?" she asked, puzzled.

"Why have ye all begun calling me 'Captain' Fraser?" he asked. "Ye weren't yesterday. Did His Grace tell ye to?"

She dropped the winsome hand and gave him a smile—which he distrusted just as much.

"Why, no. I suggested it." A slight dimple appeared in one cheek. "Or would you prefer to be called Broch Tuarach? It is your proper title, is it not?"

"It was—a thousand years ago. Mr. Fraser will do. Your Grace," he added as an afterthought, and made to pass. She reached out, though, and laid a hand on his sleeve.

"I wish to talk to you," she said, low-voiced. "You do remember me?"

"That was a thousand years ago, as well," he said, with a deliberate look that ran over her from upswept hair to dainty shoe, recalling exactly how he remembered her. "And I have business with Colonel Quarry just the now, if ye please."

She flushed a little but didn't otherwise betray any sign of discomposure. She held both his eyes and her smile and squeezed his arm lightly before removing her hand.

"I'll find you."



The brief interruption had served to take the edge off his inclination to hit things, and he strode into the library with a decent sense of himself. Rage would not serve him.

Quarry was standing by the fire, talking to Pardloe; both of them turned round, hearing him come in. Quarry's face was set; wary, but not afraid. Jamie hadn't expected him to be; he knew Quarry.

Jamie walked up to Pardloe—just close enough to make the little shit look up at him—and said, "I must beg pardon, Your Grace, for taking my leave so abruptly. I felt the need of air." Pardloe's lips twitched. "I trust you feel yourself recovered, Captain Fraser?"

"Quite, I thank ye. Colonel Quarry—your servant, sir." He'd turned to Quarry without a pause and gave him a bow correct to the inch. Quarry returned it, murmuring, "Your very obedient, sir." But Jamie had seen the tension go out of Quarry's shoulders and felt a little slackening of the tightness in his own chest.

He felt Pardloe look beyond him and knew John Grey had come in. The tightness came back.

"Do sit down, gentlemen," the duke said, with great courtesy, gesturing at the chairs near the hearth. "John, would you tell Pilcock to bring us some brandy?"



"We want to bring him to court-martial, I think," Hal said, putting down his glass. "Rather than pursue a civil case in the courts, I mean. On the one hand, a civil case—if we won—would allow us to recover whatever money the bastard hasn't yet spent, and it would give us scope to blacken his name in the press, hound him relentlessly, and generally ruin his life. However—"

"However, the reverse is true, as well," Grey said dryly. He'd fortunately never been sued but had been threatened by lawsuits now and then, escaping by the hair of his teeth, and had a very good idea of the chancy and dangerous nature of the law. "He presumably has the money to employ good lawyers. Could—and quite likely would, if half what Carruthers said is true—countersue us for defamation, drag us through the courts, and make our lives a misery for years."

"Well, yes," Hal agreed. "There's that."

"Whereas in a court-martial, the custom of the army is the basis of procedure, not statute," Harry put in. "Offers summat more flexibility. In terms of what's evidence, I mean."

This was true; essentially, anyone who liked could give testimony at a court-martial, and everything anyone said was considered evidence, though the court-martial board might dismiss or consider any of it, giving what weight they liked to the matter.

"And if he's found guilty at a court-martial, ye could, I suppose, have him shot?"

All three Englishmen looked at Fraser, startled. The Scot had sat quietly through most of their deliberations, and they'd almost forgotten he was there.

"I think it might be hanging," Hal said, after a brief pause. "Generally, we shoot men only for desertion or mutiny."

"An attractive thought, though." Quarry lifted his glass to Fraser in acknowledgment, before turning to the others. "Do we want him dead, do you think?"

Grey considered that. The notion of bringing Siverly to justice and making him account for what were very serious crimes was one thing. The notion of hunting him deliberately to his death, though ...

"I don't know," Grey said slowly. "But perhaps I ought not to take part in such considerations. Siverly did save my life at Quebec, and while that wouldn't stop me pursuing a case against him ... I think—no. I don't want him dead."

Grey didn't look at Fraser, unsure whether the Scot might consider this reluctance to exterminate Siverly as pusillanimous.

"Much better to have him cashiered and imprisoned, held up as an example," Hal said. "Besides, being executed is over too quickly. I want the bugger to suffer."

There was a faint sound from the corner where Fraser sat, a little apart. Grey glanced over and saw to his surprise that the man was laughing, in that odd Highland manner that convulsed the face while making very little sound.

"And here I thought it was mercy ye offered when ye declined to shoot me," Fraser said to Hal. "A debt of honor, did ye say?" He lifted his glass, ironical.

A deep flush rose in Hal's face. Grey didn't think he'd ever seen his brother at a total loss for words before. Hal looked at Fraser for several moments, then finally nodded.

"Touché, Captain Fraser," he said, and without a pause turned back to Grey.

"Court-martial it is, then. Harry and I will start the business here, while you and the captain go to retrieve Major Siverly. Now, Harry—who do you know in Ireland who might be of help?"



Vulgar Curiosity

Edward Twelvetrees was in Grey's mind when he awoke in the morning from a disturbing dream in which he faced a man in duello, at pistols drawn. His opponent had no face, but somehow he knew it was Edward Twelvetrees.

The roots of the dream were clear to him; he would never hear the name Twelvetrees without some thought of the duel in which Hal had killed Nathaniel Twelvetrees, after Nathaniel's seduction of Hal's first wife. Grey had known nothing about the duel at the time—let alone its cause—he being both too young and not present, having been sent away to Aberdeen after the death of his father.

The sense of the dream stayed with him through breakfast, and he went out into the garden, in hopes that fresh air would clear his head. He had not walked up and down for more than a few minutes, though, when his sister-in-law came out of the house, a basket with a pair of secateurs in it over her arm. She greeted him with pleasure, and they strolled up and down, talking idly of the boys, the play he'd seen earlier in the week, the state of Hal's head—his brother suffered periodically from the megrims and had had a sick headache the night before. But the thought of that duel would not leave him.

"Has Hal ever told you very much about Esmé?" he asked suddenly, on impulse. Minnie looked surprised but answered without hesitation.

"Yes, everything. Or so I suppose," she added, with a half smile. "Why?"

"Vulgar curiosity," John admitted. "I was quite young when they married and didn't really know her. I do remember the wedding—huge affair, white lace and diamonds, St. James's, hundreds of guests ..." He trailed off, seeing her face. "I'm sorry I wasn't here for your wedding," he said hastily, trying to make amends.

"So am I," she said, dimpling on one side. "You would have doubled the guest list. Though it wasn't here. Not in England, I mean."

"A, um, private affair, I take it?"

"Rather. Hal had Harry Quarry to stand up with him, and he got the landlady of the pub to be the other witness. It was in Amsterdam. She didn't speak English and had no idea who we were."

Grey was fascinated but afraid of giving offense by being too inquisitive.

"I see."

"No, you don't." She was openly laughing at him now. "I hadn't the slightest intention of marrying him, despite a sixmonth belly. He paid absolutely no attention to my objections, though."

"Desp—oh. Er ... Benjamin?"

"Yes." A flicker of what Grey thought of as maternal contentment touched her face, softening her mouth for an instant. She glanced at him, a glint in her eye. "I could have managed well enough."

"I daresay you could," he murmured. "How did you come to meet Hal again in Amsterdam?" What was it Hal had said? "It took me nearly six months to find her."

"He came looking for me," she said frankly. "Strode into my father's bookshop one day with fire in his eye. I nearly fainted. So did he, when he saw I was with child." She smiled, but it was an inward smile now, one of reminiscence.

"He took the most enormous breath, shook his head, then walked round the counter, picked me up, and carried me straight out of the shop and into a coach Harry had waiting outside. I was most impressed; I must have weighed eleven stone, at least." She glanced sideways at him. The dimple was back. "Are you dreadfully scandalized, John?"

"Dreadfully." What he was really thinking was that it was a mercy that Benjamin so strongly resembled Hal. He took her hand and tucked it comfortably into the crook of his elbow.

"Why are you thinking of poor Esmé?" she asked.

"Oh ... just thinking that it wasn't like Hal to marry a boring woman."

"I am reasonably sure that she wasn't boring," Minnie said dryly. "Though I thank you for the implied compliment."

"Well, I know she was beautiful—quite beautiful—but as to her character ..."

"Self-loving, narcissistic, and anxious," Minnie said concisely. "Not happy unless she was the center of attention—but very talented at getting said attention. Not stupid, by any means."

"Really." He absorbed that for a moment. "Getting attention. Do you suppose—I mean, if Hal's told you that much, I imagine you know about Nathaniel Twelvetrees?"

"I do," she said tersely, and her hand tightened a little on his arm. "Do I think she had an affair with him for his own sake, you mean? Or in order to regain Hal's attention? The latter."

He looked at her, surprised.

"You seem very sure. Is that what Hal says?"

She shook her head, and a lock of hair fell loose and drooped beside her ear. She thrust it back without ceremony. "I told him so, but I don't think he believes it.

"She loved him, you know," she said, and her mouth tightened a little. "He loved her to distraction, but it wasn't enough for her—she was one of those spoilt girls for whom no amount of devotion is ever enough. But she did love him. I read her letters." She looked up at him. "He doesn't know that, by the way."

So Hal had kept Esmé's letters, and Minnie had found them. He wondered if Hal still had them. He squeezed her hand lightly and let it go.

"He won't hear it from me."

"I know that," she said, "or I wouldn't have told you. I don't suppose you're any more anxious to see him fight another duel than I am."

"I didn't see him fight the first one. But what—why ought he—oh. Never mind." There must be something in Esmé's letters, some clue regarding yet another admirer, that Hal hadn't noticed but Minnie had.

She didn't say anything, but paused, taking her hand from his arm, and squinted balefully at a bush of some sort, turning back the rusty new leaves with one finger.

"Greenfly," she said, in a tone boding no good for either the greenflies or the gardener. Grey made an obliging noise indicating concern, and after a further glower, Minnie snorted and returned to the path.

"This Mr. Fraser of yours," she said, after they'd walked a few moments in silence.

"He's not actually *mine*," he said. He'd intended to speak lightly, and thought he had, but she shot him a glance that made him wonder.

"You know him, though," she said. "Is he ... dependable, do you think?"

"I suppose that would depend upon what one expected of him," Grey replied cautiously. "If you mean, is he a man of honor, then, yes, he is. Certainly a man of his word. Beyond that ..." He shrugged. "He is Scotch, and a Highlander, to boot."

"Meaning what?" She was interested; one brow arched upward. "Is he such a savage as people say Highlanders are? Because if so, he apes the gentleman to an amazing degree."

"James Fraser apes nothing," he assured her, feeling an obscure sense of offense on Fraser's behalf. "He is—or was—a landed gentleman, and one of breeding, with substantial property and tenants. What I meant is that he has ..." He hesitated, not quite sure how to put it into words. "... a sense of himself that is quite separate from what society demands. He is inclined to make his own rules."

She laughed at that. "No wonder Hal likes him!"

"Does he?" Grey said, feeling absurdly pleased to hear it.

"Oh, yes," she assured Grey. "He was quite surprised—but very pleased. I think he feels slightly guilty, too," she added thoughtfully. "At making use of him, I mean."

"So do I."

She smiled at him with great affection. "Yes, you would. Mr. Fraser is fortunate to have you for a friend, John."

"I doubt he recognizes his good fortune," Grey said dryly.

"Well, he needn't worry—and neither need you, John. Hal won't let him come to any harm."

"No, of course not." Still, the feeling of unease at the back of his neck did not go away.

"And if your venture should be successful, I'm sure Hal would see about getting him pardoned. He could be a free man then. He could go back to his home."

Grey felt a sudden stricture in his throat, as though his valet, Tom Byrd, had tied his stock too tightly.

"Yes. Why did you ask about him—about Fraser, I mean—being dependable?"

She lifted one shoulder and let it fall.

"Oh—Hal showed me the translation Mr. Fraser made of that page of Erse. I only wondered how faithful it might be."

"Have you any reason to suppose it isn't?" he asked

curiously. "I mean—why shouldn't it be?"

"No particular reason." She chewed her lower lip, though, in a thoughtful sort of way. "I don't speak Erse myself, of course, but I recognize a few words. I, um, don't know *quite* how much Hal told you about my father ...?"

"A bit," Grey said, and smiled at her. She smiled back.

"Well, then. I saw the occasional Jacobite document, and while most were in French or Latin, there were a few in English, and even fewer in Erse. But they all tended to have some internal clue, some casual mention of something that would assure the recipient that what they were holding wasn't merely an order for wine or a merchant's inquiry about the contents of his warehouse. And one of the code things you saw mentioned quite often was a white rose. For the Stuarts, you know?"

"I do." For a vertiginous instant, he saw—as clearly as though the scene had sprung from the earth at his feet—the face of the man he had shot on Culloden Moor, his eyes dark and the white cockade in his bonnet stark in the dying light of evening.

Minnie paid no attention to his momentary distraction, though, and went on talking.

"Well, this bit you brought Hal has the words *róisíní bhán* in it. It's not *quite* the same, but it's very similar to the Scottish words for 'white rose'—I saw them often enough to know those. And Mr. Fraser put the word 'rose' into his translation, all right—but he left out the 'white.' If it's there to begin with, I mean," she added. "And perhaps the Irish is sufficiently different that he didn't see it, if it *is* there."

They turned, as though some signal had been given, and started back toward the house. Grey swallowed, trying to quiet the thumping of his heart.

It was clear enough what she meant. The poem about the Wild Hunt might be a coded Jacobite document of some sort. And *if* it was, Fraser might have recognized that fact and

deliberately suppressed it, perhaps to protect friends affiliated with the Stuart cause. If that were the case, it raised two questions, both of them disturbing.

To wit: had Siverly a Jacobite connection, and ... what else might Jamie Fraser have left out?

"Only one way to find out," he said. "I'll ask him. Carefully."



The Belly of a Flea

The ice had been broken between Grey and James Fraser, but Grey still felt considerable delicacy about the resumption of what might be called normal relations. He hadn't forgotten that conversation in the stables at Helwater, and he was damned sure Fraser hadn't, either.

True, they would be in close company in Ireland and must find a way to ignore the past for the sake of working together—but no need to force the matter before time.

Still, he remained acutely aware of Fraser's presence in the house. Everyone did. Half the servants were afraid of him, the others simply unsure what to do with him. Hal dealt with him courteously, but with a sense of wary formality; Grey thought that Hal might be having the occasional doubt about the wisdom of his decision to conscript Fraser, and smiled grimly at the thought. Minnie seemed the only member of the household able to talk to him with any sense of normality.

Tom Byrd had been terrified of the big Scot, having had an unsettling experience with him at Helwater—though Grey thought that was more a matter of Tom, who was quite sensitive to social nuance, picking up the violent vibrations occurring between himself and Fraser, than of personal interaction.

When informed that he would be attending to Captain

Fraser's valeting, in addition to Grey's, though, Tom had grasped the nettle manfully and been very helpful in compiling the tailor's list. He was passionate in the matter of male clothing and had lost quite a bit of his nervousness in the discussion of what might be suitable.

To Grey's surprise, Tom Byrd was in the parlor when he came down in the morning, and the valet stuck his head out into the hall to hail him.

"The captain's new clothes have come, me lord! Come see!"

Tom turned a beaming face on Grey as he entered the parlor. The furniture was draped with muslin-wrapped shapes, like small Egyptian mummies. Tom had unwrapped one of these and now laid out a bottle-green coat with gilt buttons, spreading the skirts lovingly over the settee.

"That bundle on the pianoforte is shirts," he informed Grey. "I didn't like to take them up, in case the captain was asleep."

Grey glanced out the window, which showed the sun well up; it must be eight o'clock, at least. The notion that Fraser might be having a lie-in was ludicrous; he doubted the man had ever slept past dawn in his life, and he certainly hadn't done it any time in the last fifteen years. But Tom's remark indicated that the Scot hadn't either appeared for breakfast or sent for a tray. Could he be ill?

He was not. The sound of the front door opening and closing turned Grey toward the hall in time to see Fraser stride past, face flushed fresh with the morning's air.

"Mr. Fraser!" he called, and Fraser swung round, surprised but not disturbed. He came in, ducking automatically beneath the lintel. One brow was arched in inquiry, but there was no hint in his face of disquiet or of that closed expression that hid anger, fear, or calculation.

He's only been for a walk; he hasn't seen anyone, Grey thought, and was slightly ashamed of the thought. Who, after

all, would he see in London?

"Behold," Grey said, smiling, and gestured toward the muslin parcels. Tom had unwrapped a suit of an odd purplish brown and was stroking the pile.

"Would you look at this, sir?" Tom said, so pleased with the garments that he momentarily overcame his nervousness of Fraser. "I've never seen such a color in me life—but it'll suit you prime!"

To Grey's surprise, Fraser smiled back, almost shyly.

"I've seen it before," he said, and put out a hand to stroke the fabric. "In France. *Couleur puce*, it was called. The Duc d'Orleans had a suit made of it, and verra proud of it he was, too."

Tom's eyes were round. He looked quickly at Grey—had his employer known that his prisoner hobnobbed with French dukes?—then back at Fraser.

"Pee-yuse?" he said, trying out the word. "Color of a ... what's a peeyuse, then?"

Fraser actually laughed at that, and Grey felt a startled small burst of pleasure at the sound.

"A flea," Fraser told Tom. "The whole of the name means 'the color of the belly of a flea,' but that's a bit much, even for the French."

Tom squinted at the coat one-eyed, evidently comparing it to fleas he had known. "It's not like that word pew-cell, is it? Would that be like a little-bitty flea?"

Fraser's mouth twitched, and his eyes darted toward Grey.

"Pucelle?" he said, pronouncing it in good French. "I, erm, don't think so, though I might of course be mistaken."

Grey felt his ribs creak slightly but managed to speak casually. "Where did you come across the word *pucelle*, Tom?"

Tom considered for a moment.

"Oh. Colonel Quarry, when he was here last week. He asked me could I think of anything that rhymed with pew-

cell. 'Usual' was all I could think of, and he didn't think much o' that, I could tell, though he wrote it down in his notebook, just in case, he said."

"Colonel Quarry writes poetry," Grey explained to Fraser, getting another lifted brow in return. "Very ... um ... individual style of verse."

"I know," Fraser said, to Grey's utter astonishment. "He asked me once if I could think of a suitable rhyme for 'virgin.'"

"He did? When?"

"At Ardsmuir," Fraser said, with no apparent emotion, from which Grey concluded that Harry hadn't actually shown the Scot any of his poetry. "Over dinner. I couldna bring anything to mind save 'sturgeon,' though. He didna bother writing that one down," he added, turning to Tom. "There was a good deal of brandy drunk."

"Though for what the observation is worth, *pucelle* is the French word for 'virgin,' " Grey told Tom. He glanced at Fraser. "Perhaps he couldn't manage the verse in English, abandoned it, and later decided to try it in French?"

Fraser made a small sound of amusement, but Tom was still frowning.

"Have French virgins got fleas, do you think?"

"I never met a Frenchwoman I felt I could ask," Grey said. "But I have met a good many fleas, and they tend not to be respecters of persons, let alone of purity."

Tom shook his head, dismissing this bit of natural philosophy as beyond him, and returned with an air of relief to his natural sphere of competence.

"Well, then. There's the pee-yuse velvet suit, the blue silk, the brown worsted, and two coats for everyday, bottle-green and sapphire, and three waistcoats, two plain and a yellow one with fancy-work. Dark breeches, white breeches, stockings, shirts, small-clothes ..." He pointed at various parcels here and there about the room, consulting the list in

his head. "Now, the shoes haven't come yet, nor the riding boots. Will those do for the Beefsteak, do you think, me lord?" He squinted doubtfully at the shoes on Jamie's feet, these being the sturdy objects borrowed from Lady Joffrey's chairman. They had been buffed and polished to the limits of the bootboy's capability but were not intrinsically fashionable.

Grey joined Tom's scrutiny and lifted one shoulder in a shrug.

"Change the buckles, and they'll do. Take the silver-gilt ones from my brown calfskin court shoes. Mr. Fraser?" He motioned delicately at Jamie's feet, and Jamie obligingly stepped out of the objects in question, allowing Tom to take them away.

Fraser waited until Tom was safely out of hearing before inquiring, "The Beefsteak?"

"My club. The Society for the Appreciation of the English Beefsteak. We are taking dinner there today, with Captain von Namtzen." He felt a small warmth at thought of Stephan. "I've acquainted him with the Siverly matter, and he is bringing someone he knows who might be helpful. He may have some information, but I also wish him to look at that fragment of Erse poetry you translated. He knows a good deal about verse and has encountered several variations on the Wild Hunt."

"Aye? What sort of establishment is this club?" A slight crease showed between Fraser's heavy brows.

"It's not a bawdy house," Grey assured him, with an edge. "Just an ordinary gentleman's club." It occurred to him that perhaps Fraser had never *been* in a gentleman's club? Certainly he'd never been in London, but ...

Fraser gave him a marked look. "I meant, what is the nature of the gentlemen who are members of this particular club? You say we are to meet Captain von Namtzen; is it a club patronized largely by soldiers?"

"Yes, it is," Grey said, somewhat puzzled. "Why?" Fraser's lips compressed for an instant.

"If there is a possibility of my encountering men whom I knew during the Rising, I should like to know it."

"Ah." That possibility had not struck Grey. "I think it is not likely," he said slowly. "But it would be as well, perhaps, to arrange a ... er ..."

"A fiction?" Fraser said, an edge in his voice. "To account for my recent whereabouts and current situation?"

"Yes," Grey said, ignoring both the edge and the return of that simmering air of resentment. He bowed politely. "I will leave that to you, Mr. Fraser. You can inform me of the details on our way to the Beefsteak."



Jamie followed Grey into the Beefsteak with a sense of wary curiosity. He'd never been in a London gentleman's club, though he'd experienced a wide range of such establishments in Paris. Given the basic differences of personality and outlook between Frenchmen and Englishmen, though, he supposed that their social behavior might be different, as well. The food was certain to be.

"Von Namtzen!" Grey had caught sight of a tall, fair-haired man in a German uniform coming out of a room down the hall, and hurried toward him. This must be Stephan von Namtzen, the Graf von Erdberg, and the gentleman they had come to see.

The big man's face lighted at sight of Grey, whom he greeted with a warm kiss on both cheeks, in the continental style. Grey appeared used to this and smiled, though he did not return the embrace, stepping back to introduce Jamie.

The graf was missing one arm, the sleeve of his coat pinned up across his chest, but shook Jamie's hand warmly with his remaining one. He had shrewd gray eyes, the graf, and struck Jamie at once as both affable and competent—a good soldier. He relaxed a little; the graf presumably knew both who and what he was; there would be no need for fictions.

"Come," said von Namtzen, with a cordial inclination of his head. "I have a private room reserved for us." He led the way down the hall with Grey beside him, Jamie following more slowly, glancing aside into the various rooms they passed. The club was old and had an atmosphere of discreet, comfortable wealth. The dining room was laid with white napery and gleaming heavy silver, the smoking room furnished with well-aged leather chairs, sagging slightly in the seat and redolent of good tobacco. The runner under his feet was an aged Turkey carpet, worn nearly to the threads in the middle, but a good one, with medallions of scarlet and gold.

There was a low hum about the place, of conversation and service; he could hear the clinking of pots and spoons and crockery from a distant kitchen, and the scent of roasting meat perfumed the air. He could see why Grey liked the place; if you belonged here, it would embrace you. He himself did not belong here but, for a moment, rather wished he did.

Grey and von Namtzen had paused to exchange greetings with a friend; Jamie took the opportunity for a discreet inquiry of the steward.

"Turn right at the end of the hallway, sir, and you'll find it just to your left," the man said, with a courteous inclination of the head.

"Thank you," he said, and gave Grey a brief lift of the chin, indicating his destination. It had been a long trip from Newmarket, and God knew what might happen over dinner. An empty bladder and clean hands were as much preparation as it lay within his power to make.



Grey nodded at Fraser's mute gesture, and continued his conversation with Mordecai Weston, a Captain in the Buffs, who knew von Namtzen as well. He expected Fraser to return momentarily, but after five minutes began to wonder whether something was wrong and excused himself.

He came round the corner in time to see Fraser just outside the privy closet, in conversation with Edward Twelvetrees. Yes, it was bloody Twelvetrees. No mistaking that pale, longnosed face, the beady little ferret-black eyes. The surprise stopped him dead, but close enough to hear Twelvetrees demand to know what Grey's business was with Fraser—and to hear Fraser decline to say.

Fraser disappeared into the privy closet with a firm shutting of the door; Grey took advantage of the sound to walk quietly up behind Twelvetrees, who was glaring at the closed door, evidently waiting for Fraser to come out and face further interrogation. Grey tapped Twelvetrees on the shoulder, and was immensely gratified when the man gave a cry of alarm and flung himself round, hands raised.

"I am so sorry to startle you, sir," he said, with extreme politeness. "Did I hear you asking after me?"

Twelvetrees's startlement changed in an instant to rage, and his hand slapped his side, reaching for the sword he fortunately wasn't wearing.

"You bloody meddler!"

Grey felt blood swell in his temples, but kept his voice light and civil.

"If you have business with me, sir, I suggest that you speak to me directly, rather than seek to harass my friends."

Twelvetrees's lip curled, but he'd got control of himself.

"Friends," he repeated, in a tone indicating astonishment that Grey should think he had any. "I suppose I should not be amazed that you make a friend of traitors. But I wonder, sir, that you should so far forget yourself as to bring such a man as that into this place."

Grey's heart had given a bump at the word "traitors," but he replied coolly, "You are fortunate that you did not use that word to the gentleman in question. While I take the liberty of offense on his behalf, he might be inclined to take action, whereas I would not sully my sword with your blood."

Twelvetrees's eyes grew brighter and blacker.

"Wouldn't you?" he said, and gave a short laugh. "Believe me, *sir*, I await your pleasure. In the meantime, I shall complain to the Committee regarding your choice of guests."

He shouldered his way past Grey, pushing him roughly aside, and walked down the hallway to the back stair, head held high.

Grey made his way back toward the dining-room, wondering how the devil Twelvetrees happened to know Jamie Fraser. But perhaps he didn't, he thought. If he'd inquired Fraser's name, Fraser would have told him it, as well as informing him that he was Grey's guest. And he supposed it wasn't beyond the stretch of reason that Twelvetrees should recall Fraser's name from the Rising—particularly when linked with his Scottish accent.

Yes, that might be mere chance. He was somewhat more concerned that Twelvetrees had exhibited interest in his own actions—and that Twelvetrees had called him a meddler. Meddling in what? Surely Twelvetrees couldn't know that he appeared in Carruthers's document, let alone that the Greys were in pursuit of Gerald Siverly. He hesitated for a moment, but this was not the time nor the place to speak with Twelvetrees. He shrugged and went back to von Namtzen.



"I have brought a ... gentleman of my acquaintance," the

graf was saying, with a half-apologetic glance at Grey. "Since you tell me it is a matter of Irish." Lowering his voice, he said in rapid German, "I have of course said nothing to him of your matter; only that there is a poem written in his tongue and you want to know if the translation you have is accurate."

Jamie had neither spoken nor heard German in many years but was reasonably sure he'd gathered the sense of this correctly. He tried to recall whether he had ever told Grey that German was among his languages—he didn't think so, and Grey didn't glance at him when von Namtzen spoke but replied in the same language, thanking the German. Grey called him "Du," Jamie noticed, using the familiar form of address—but he could have seen easily that the graf was an intimate friend by the way in which he touched Grey's sleeve.

He supposed it was reasonable that the Greys would want to check his translation of the poem—he'd told them that the *Gaidhlig* and the *Gaeilge* were different and that he did not certify his translation as completely accurate, though he could give them the overall sense of what it said. Still, there was the one small thing that he had deliberately omitted, and it gave him a minor qualm. If the graf had brought an Irish-speaker to give a new translation, the line about the Wild Hunt strewing white roses to mark the victorious path of their queen was sure to show up in contrast to his version, which had merely mentioned the faeries strewing roses.

He'd recognized it as a coded Jacobite document at once; he'd seen any number of such things during his spying days in Paris. But having no idea who had written it or what the code said, he had chosen not to mention that aspect; if there were hidden Jacobites operating in Ireland—and Tobias Quinn had told him there were—it was not his business to expose them to the interest of the English. But if—

His thoughts stopped abruptly as he followed the graf and

Grey into the private room, and the gentleman already there rose to greet them.

He wasn't shocked. Or rather, he thought, it was simply that he didn't believe what he was seeing. Whichever it was, he took Thomas Lally's proffered hand with a feeling of total calm.

"Broch Tuarach," Lally said, in that clipped way of his, formal as a topiary bush at Versailles.

"Monsieur le Comte," Jamie said, shaking Lally's hand. "Comment ça va?"

Thomas Lally had been one of Charles Stuart's aidesdecamp. Half Irish and born in Ireland but half French, he had fled Scotland after Falkirk and promptly taken up a commission with the French army, where he had been courageous but unpopular.

How the devil did he come to be here?

Jamie hadn't voiced that thought, but it must have shown on his face, for Lally smiled sourly.

"I am, like you, a prisoner of the English," he said in French. "I was captured at Pondicherry. Though my captors are sufficiently generous as to maintain my parole in London."

"Ah, I see you are acquainted," said von Namtzen, who undoubtedly spoke French fluently but diplomatically pretended that he didn't. He beamed cordially. "How nice! Shall we eat first?"

They did, enjoying a solid dinner in the English style—Lally ate his way ravenously through three courses, and Jamie thought that while the English might be maintaining him, they weren't doing it lavishly. Lally was twenty years Jamie's senior but looked even older, deeply weathered from the Indian sun and half toothless, with hollowed cheeks that made his prominent nose and chin even more prominent than they would otherwise be and a deeply furrowed brow that gave him an air of suppressed fury rather than worry.

He didn't wear a uniform, and his suit was old-fashioned, very worn at cuff and elbow, though his linen was clean.

In the course of the meal, Jamie learned that Lally's case was somewhat more complicated than his own: while the Comte de Lally was a prisoner of the English Crown, the French had charged him with treason, and Lally was agitating to be returned to France on parole, demanding a court martial there, by which he might clear his name.

The graf did not say so, but Jamie got the impression that von Namtzen had promised to put in a good word for Lally in this endeavor and thus secured his presence and—presumably—his cooperation.

He was aware that Lally was studying him as closely as he was observing Lally—and doubtless for the same reasons, wondering just what Jamie's relations were with his captors, and what was the nature of his cooperation with them.

The conversation over dinner was general in nature and conducted mostly in English. It was not until the table had been cleared and a copy of the Wild Hunt poem produced by Grey that Jamie heard Lally speak Irish, holding the sheet of paper at arm's length and reading it slowly aloud.

It gave him an odd feeling. He hadn't heard or spoken the *Gàidhlig* in many years, save in the privacy of his own mind, and hearing words with such a homely, familiar sound made him momentarily feel that he might weep. He swallowed, though, and the moment passed.

"Herr Graf tells me that you've done a translation of this," Lally said, putting down the paper and looking sharply at Jamie. "An bhfuil Gaeilge agat?" Do you have the Irish, then?

Jamie shook his head. "Chan-eil. Ach tuigidh mi gu leor dha na faclan. Bheil thu g'am thuigsinn sa?" he said in Gàidhlig. No, though I could make out many of the words. Do you understand me?

Lally smiled, his harsh expression softening wonderfully, and Jamie thought that it was long since that Lally had heard anything like the language of his birth.

"Your tongue blooms with flowers," Lally said—or Jamie thought that was what he said, and smiled back.

"You understand each the other's tongue?" von Namtzen said, interested. "It sounds very much the same to me."

"It's ... rather like an Italian speaking wi' a Spaniard," Jamie said, still smiling at Lally. "But we might make shift."

"I should be very grateful for your assistance in this matter, *Monsieur le Comte*," Grey said formally. "As would my brother."

Oh, so that's it, Jamie thought. Pardloe would put his not inconsiderable influence to work on Lally's behalf, in return for this. The English might get an accurate translation after all. *Or maybe not*, he thought, seeing Lally's polite smile in return.

Ink, paper, and quill were brought, and the graf and Grey retired to the far side of the room, talking commonplaces in German, in order to leave Lally to his work. He read the poem through two or three times, asking Jamie brief questions, and then took up his quill.

They spoke mostly in English but dropped more and more into their respective forms of Gaelic, heads together—and eyes on the sheet, conscious of the presence of John Grey watching them.

"Did you leave out anything *machnaigh*?" Lally asked casually.

Jamie struggled with *machnaigh* but thought it meant "deliberately."

"Se an fhirinn a bh-agam. Ach a' seo—" I spoke faithfully. But here ... He put his finger on the line about the white roses. "Bha e ... goirid." I spoke ... short.

Lally's eyes flicked to his, then back to the sheet, but the comte didn't change expression.

"Yes, I think you were right about that one," he said casually in English. He took a fresh sheet of paper, pulled

another quill from the jar, and handed it to Jamie. "Here. Write down your translation. That will make it easier."

It took some time; they conferred over the sheets, Lally stabbing at Jamie's translation with his quill and leaving ink blots on the page as he asked questions—sometimes in Irish, sometimes in French or English—then scribbling on his own sheet, crossing things out and adding notes in the margin. No mention of white roses.

At last, though, he made a clean copy, writing slowly—he had rheumatism badly in his hands; his knuckles were knobbed and his fingers twisted with it—and gave this to Lord John.

"There you are, my lord," he said, and leaned back, groaning a little. "I hope it may be of help in whatever your venture may be."

"I thank you," Grey said, scanning the sheet. He looked up at Lally, one brow raised. "If you would be so kind, Monsieur—have you ever seen a thing like this before?"

"Oh—often, my lord." Lally looked surprised. "Though not written down. It is a common thing in Ireland, though—tales like that."

"You have not seen it in any other context?"

Lally shook his head, definite.

"No, my lord."

Grey sighed and folded the sheet carefully into his pocket, thanking Lally once again, and, with a brief glance at Jamie, rose to leave.

The day was fine, and they walked back to Argus House. Grey had decided, upon reflection, to make no reference to Edward Twelvetrees—not until he'd spoken to Hal. They therefore spoke very little, but as they reached the Alexandra Gate, Grey turned and said to Jamie, seriously, "Do you think he made a fair translation?"

"I am quite sure he did it to the best of his ability, my lord."



By Darkness Met

Jamie roused abruptly and sat up in bed, hand going automatically beneath his pillow for his dirk before his mind made sense of where he was. The door closed almost silently, and he was on the verge of diving out of bed, ready to throw himself at the intruder's legs, but he smelled perfume and stopped short, completely bewildered, tangled between thoughts of prison, Jared's house in Paris, inn rooms, Claire's bed ... but Claire had never worn a scent like that.

The woman's weight pressed down the mattress beside him, and a hand touched his arm. A light touch, and he felt the hairs bristle in response.

"Forgive me for calling upon you so unceremoniously," the duchess said, and he could hear the humor in her low voice. "I thought it better to be discreet."

"Ye think this is discreet?" he said, barely remembering to lower his own voice. "Holy God!"

"You would prefer that I pretend to encounter you by accident at a Punch and Judy show in the park?" she asked, and his heart nearly stopped. "I doubt we should have enough time."

His heart was still pounding like a drum, but he'd got control of his breath, at least.

"A long story, is it?" he asked, as evenly as possible. "Perhaps ye'd be more comfortable sitting in the chair,

then."

She rose, with a small sound that might have been amusement, and he heard the muffled scrape of chair legs over the Turkey carpet. He took advantage of her movement to get out of bed—talk of being taken at a disadvantage—and sit down in the window seat, tucking the nightshirt primly round his legs.

What had she meant by that remark about the Punch and Judy show? Had his encounter with Quinn been noticed and reported? Or was it merely a chance remark?

She paused by the chair, an amorphous shape in the dark.

"Shall I light the candle?"

"No. Your Grace," he added, with a certain sardonic emphasis.

The sky was overcast, but there was a waxing moon tonight, and he'd drawn back the curtains when he went to bed, not liking the feeling of enclosure. There was a soft, bright glow through the window behind him. He wouldn't have a distinct view of her face—but she wouldn't see his at all.

She sat down, her garments whispering, and sighed briefly but said nothing immediately. It was an old trick, and one he knew well. He didn't speak, either, though his mind was churning with questions. The most important one being, did the duke know?

"Yes, he does," she said. He nearly bit his tongue.

"Oh, aye?" he managed. "And may I ask just what your husband knows?"

"About me, of course." The faint note of amusement was back. "He knew what my ... mode of life ... was when he married me."

"A man of blood and iron, then."

She laughed outright at that, though softly.

"And does he know that ye kent me back then?"

"He does. He does not know what I came to talk with you

about."

He wondered whether the duke knew *that* she had come to talk to him in his bedroom, but merely made a polite sound of invitation, and the duchess's robe rustled softly as she settled herself.

"Do you know a man named Edward Twelvetrees?"

"I saw him briefly today," he said. "At the Beefsteak club. Who is he, and why do I care?"

"Edward Twelvetrees," she said, with a note of grimness in her voice, "is an estimable soldier, an honorable gentleman—and the younger brother of Nathaniel Twelvetrees, whom my husband killed in a duel many years ago."

"A duel over ...?"

"Not important," she said tersely. "The point is that the entire Twelvetrees family harbors feelings of the deepest hatred for my husband—well, for all the Greys, but particularly Pardloe—and would do anything possible to damage him.

"The second point," she went on, cutting off his next question, "is that Edward Twelvetrees is an intimate of Gerald Siverly. Very intimate. And the third is that for the last year, Edward Twelvetrees has been moving fairly large sums of money—far more than would normally pass through his hands; he's a younger brother, and has no more than his pay and his winnings at cards."

He leaned forward a little, intent now.

"Moving them where? And where do they come from?"

"They're going to Ireland. I don't know where they're coming from."

He turned that over in his mind for a moment.

"Why are ye telling me this?"

She hesitated, and he could feel her calculation but didn't know the exact nature of it. Not how much to trust him, he didn't think—only a fool would trust him with dangerous information, and he was sure the duchess was no fool. How

much to tell him, though ...

"I love my husband, Mr. Fraser," she said at last, softly. "I don't want him—or John, for that matter—to find himself in a position where the Twelvetrees family might do him harm.

"I want you, if at all possible, to see that that doesn't happen. If your inquiries in Ireland should lead you into contact with Edward Twelvetrees, I implore you, Mr. Fraser: try to keep him away from John, and try to see that whatever he's doing with Major Siverly doesn't intrude into the matter you're dealing with."

He'd followed her train of thought reasonably well, he thought, and ventured a question to check.

"Ye mean, whatever the money's about—even if it's going to, or through, Major Siverly—it's not to do wi' the matters covered by the court-martial your husband wants. And, therefore, ye want me to try to keep Lord John from following up any such trail, should he stumble over it?"

She gave a little sigh.

"Thank you, Mr. Fraser. I assure you, any entanglement with Edward Twelvetrees cannot help but lead to disaster."

"For your husband, his brother—or your father?" he asked softly, and heard the sharp intake of her breath. After the briefest instant, though, the low gurgle of her laughter came again.

"Father always said you were the best of the Jacobite agents," she said approvingly. "Are you still ... in touch?"

"I am not," he said definitely. "But it had to be your father who told ye about the money. If either Pardloe or Grey knew that, they would have mentioned it when we were making plans with Colonel Quarry."

There was a small puff of amusement, and the duchess rose, a white blur against the darkness. She brushed down her robe and turned to go, but paused at the door.

"If you keep my secrets, Mr. Fraser, I will keep yours."



He resumed his bed cautiously; it smelt of her scent—and her body—and while not at all unpleasant, both were unsettling to him. So was her last remark—though upon due contemplation, he thought it had been mere persiflage. He had no secrets that needed keeping anymore—save the one, and there was little chance that she even knew of William's existence, still less that she knew the truth of his paternity.

He could hear a church bell in the distance, striking the hour—a single, mellow *bong*. One o'clock, and the solitude of the deep night began to settle around him.

He thought briefly about what the duchess had told him about the money Twelvetrees was moving into Ireland, but there was nothing he could do with the information, and he was worn out with the strain of being constantly on his guard in this nest of English. His thoughts stretched and frayed, tangled and dissolved, and before the clock struck the half hour, he was asleep.



John Grey heard the bell of St. Mary Abbot strike one and put down his book, rubbing his eyes. There were several more in an untidy pile beside him, along with the muddy dregs of the coffee that had been keeping him awake during his researches. Even coffee had its limits, though.

He had been reading through several versions of the Wild Hunt tale, as collected and recounted by various authorities. While undeniably fascinating, none of these matched with either the language or the events given in Carruthers's version, nor did they shed any particular light upon it.

If he hadn't known Charlie, hadn't seen the passion and precision with which he had prepared his complaint against Siverly, he would have been tempted to discard the document, concluding that it had been mixed in with the

others by mistake. But he did know Charlie.

The only possibility he had been able to deduce was that Charlie himself did not know the import of the Wild Hunt poem but did know that it had to do with Siverly—and that it was important in some way. And there, for the moment, the matter rested. There was, in all justice, plenty of incriminating material with which to be going on.

With thoughts of wild faerie hordes, dark woods, and the wail of hunting horns echoing in the reaches of the night, he took his candle and went up to bed, pausing to blow out the lighted sconces that had been left burning for him in the foyer. One of the little boys had wakened earlier with stomachache or nightmare, but the nursery was quiet now. There was no light in the second-floor corridor, but he paused, hearing a sound. Soft footfalls toward the far end of the hallway, and a door opened, spilling candlelight. He caught a glimpse of Minnie, pale in flowing white muslin, stepping through the door into Hal's arms, and heard the whisper of Hal's voice.

Not wishing them to see him, he hurried quickly up the stairs to the next floor, to hide his candle, and stood there in the dark for a moment, to give them time to retire.

One of the boys must have been taken sick again. He couldn't think what else Minnie would be doing up at such an hour.

He listened carefully; the night nursery was one more floor up, but he heard no outcries, no movement in the peaceful dark. Nor was there any noise from the floor below. Evidently, the whole household was now wrapped in slumber—save him.

He rather liked the feeling of solitude, like this, he alone wakeful, lord of the sleeping world.

Not *quite* the lord of the sleeping world. A brief, sharp cry sliced through the dark, and he started as though it had been a drawing pin run into his leg.

The cry was not repeated but hadn't come from the nursery above. It had definitely come from down the corridor to his left, where the guest rooms lay. And, to his knowledge, no one slept at that end of the corridor save Jamie Fraser. Walking very quietly, he made his way toward Fraser's door.

He could hear heavy breathing, as of a man wakened from nightmare. Ought he go in? *No, you ought not*, he thought promptly. *If he's awake, he's free of the dream already*.

He was turning to creep back toward the stairs, when he heard Fraser's voice.

"Could I but lay my head in your lap, lass," Fraser's voice came softly through the door. "Feel your hand on me, and sleep wi' the scent of you about me."

Grey's mouth was dry, his limbs frozen. He should not be hearing this, was suffused with shame to hear it, but dared not move for fear of making a sound.

There came a rustling, as of a large body turning violently in the bed, and then a muffled sound—a gasp, a sob?—and silence. He stood still, listening to his own heart, to the ticking of the longcase clock in the hall below, to the distant sounds of the house, settling for night. A minute, by counted seconds. Two. Three, and he lifted a foot, stepping quietly back. One more step, and then heard a final murmur, a whisper so strangled that only the acuteness of his attention brought him the words.

"Christ, Sassenach. I need ye."

He would in that moment have sold his soul to be able to offer comfort. But there was no comfort he could give, and he made his way silently down the stairs, missing the last step in the dark and coming down hard.



Fridstool

By the next afternoon, the inside of Jamie's head was buzzing like a hive of bees, one thought vanishing up the arse of the next before he could get hold of it. He badly needed peace to sort through it all, but the house was nearly as busy as his mind. There were servants *everywhere*. It was as bad as Versailles, he thought. Chambermaids, wee smudgit maids called tweenies who seemed to spend all their time trudging up and down the back stairs with buckets and brushes, footmen, bootboys, butlers ... He'd nearly run down John Grey's young valet in the hallway a minute ago, turning a corner and finding Byrd under his feet, the lad so buried under a heap of dirty linen he was carrying that he could barely see over it.

Jamie couldn't even sit quietly in his room. If someone wasn't coming in to air the sheets, someone else was coming in to build the fire or take away the rug to be beaten or bring fresh candles or ask whether his stockings needed darning. They did, but still.

What he needed, he thought suddenly, was a fridstool. As though the thought had released him in some way, he got up and set off with determination to find one, narrowly avoiding embranglement with two footmen who were carrying an enormous settee up the front stair, it being too wide for the back.

Not the park. Aside from the possibility of lurking Quinns, the place teemed with people. And while none of them would likely trouble him, the essence of a fridstool was solitude. He turned toward the hall that led toward the back of the house and the garden.

It was an elderly Anglican nun who'd told him what a fridstool was, just last year. Sister Eudoxia was a distant connection of Lady Dunsany's, who'd come to Helwater to recuperate from what Cook said was the dropsical dispersion.

Glimpsing Sister Eudoxia sitting in a wicker elbow chair on the lawn, wrinkled eyelids closed against the sun like a lizard's, he'd wondered what Claire would have said of the lady's condition. She wouldn't have called it a dropsical dispersion, he supposed, and smiled involuntarily at the thought, recalling his wife's outspokenness on the matter of such complaints as iliac passions, confined bowels, or what one practitioner called "the universal relaxation of the solids."

The sister *did* have the dropsy, though. He'd learned that when he came upon her one evening, quite unexpectedly, leaning on the paddock fence, wheezing, her lips blue.

"Shall I fetch ye someone, Sister?" he said, alarmed at her appearance. "A maid—shall I send for Lady Dunsany?"

She didn't answer at once but turned toward him, struggling for breath, and lost her grip on the fence. He seized her as she began to fall and, from sheer necessity, picked her up in his arms. He apologized profusely, much alarmed—what if she were about to die?—looking wildly round for help, but then realized that she was not in fact expiring. She was laughing. Barely able to catch breath but laughing, bony shoulders shaking slightly under the dark cloak she wore.

"No ... young ... man," she managed at last, and coughed a bit. "I'll be all ... right. Take me—" She ran out of air but

pointed a trembling finger toward the little folly that roosted among the trees beyond the stable.

He was disconcerted but did what she wanted. She relaxed quite naturally against him, and he was moved at sight of the neat parting in her gray hair, just visible at the edge of her veil. She was frail but heavier than he'd thought, and as he lowered her carefully onto the little bench in the folly, he saw that her lower legs and feet were grossly swollen, the flesh puffing over the straps of the sandals she wore. She smiled up at him.

"Do you know, I believe that is the first time I've found myself in a young man's arms? Quite a pleasant experience; perhaps if I'd had it earlier, I should not have been a nun."

Dark eyes twinkled up at him from a network of deep wrinkles, and he couldn't help smiling back.

"I shouldna like to think myself a threat to your vow o' chastity, Sister."

She laughed outright at that, wheezing gently, then coughed, pounding her chest with one hand.

"I dinna want to be responsible for your death, either, Sister," he said, eyeing her with concern. Her lips were faintly blue. "Should I not fetch someone for ye? Or at least tell someone to bring ye a bit of brandy?"

"You should not," she said definitely, and reached into a capacious pocket at her waist, withdrawing a small bottle. "I haven't drunk spirits in more than fifty years, but the doctor says I must have a drop for the sake of my health, and who am I to say him nay? Sit down, young man." She motioned him to the bench beside her with such a firmly authoritative air that he obeyed, after a furtive look round to see that they were not observed.

She sipped from the bottle, then offered it to him, to his surprise. He shook his head, but she pushed it into his hand.

"I insist, young man—what is your name? I cannot go on calling you 'young man.' "

"Alex MacKenzie, Sister," he said, and took a token sip of what was clearly excellent brandy, before handing back the bottle. "Sister, I must go back to my work. Let me fetch someone—"

"No," she said firmly. "You've done me a service, Mr. MacKenzie, in seeing me to my fridstool, but you will do me a much greater service by not informing the people in the house that I am here." She saw his puzzlement and smiled, exposing three or four very worn and yellowed teeth. It was an engaging smile, for all that.

"Are you not familiar with the term? Ah. I see. You are Scotch, and yet you knew to call me 'Sister,' from which I deduce that you are a Papist. Perhaps Papists do not have fridstools in their churches?"

"Perhaps not in Scottish kirks, Sister," he said cautiously. He'd thought at first it might be a sort of closestool or private privy, but probably not if you found them in churches.

"Well, everyone should have one," she said firmly, "whether Papist or not. A fridstool is a seat of refuge, of sanctuary. Churches—*English* churches—often have one, for the use of persons seeking sanctuary, though I must say, they aren't used as often these days as in former centuries." She waved a hand knobbed with rheumatism and took another drink.

"As I no longer have my cell as a place of private retirement, I was obliged to find a fridstool. And I think I have chosen well," she added, with a look of complacency about the folly.

She had, if privacy was what she wanted. The folly, a miniature Greek temple, had been erected by some forgotten architect, and while the site had much to recommend it in summer, being surrounded by copper beeches and with a view of the lake, it was an inconvenient distance from the house, and no one had visited it in months. Dead leaves lay

in drifts in the corners, one of the wooden lattices hung from a corner nail, having been torn loose in a winter storm, and the white pillars that framed the opening were thick with abandoned cobwebs and spattered with dirt.

"It's a bit chilly, Sister," he said, as tactfully as possible. The place was cold as a tomb, and he didn't want her death on his conscience—let alone laid at his door.

"At my age, Mr. MacKenzie, cold is the natural state of being," she said tranquilly. "Perhaps it is nature's way of easing us toward the final chill of the grave. Nor would dying of pleurisy be that much more unpleasant—nor much faster—than dying of the dropsy, as I am. But I did bring a warm cloak, as well as the brandy."

He gave up arguing; he'd known enough strong-minded women to recognize futility when he met it. But he did wish Claire were here, to give her opinion on the old sister's health, perhaps to give her a helpful draught of something. He felt helpless himself—and surprised at the strength of his desire to help the old nun.

"You may go now, Mr. MacKenzie," she said, quite gently, and laid a hand on his, light as a moth's touch. "I won't tell anyone you brought me here."

Reluctantly, he rose.

"I'll come back for ye, how's that?" he said. He didn't want her trying to stagger back to the house by herself. She'd likely fall into the ha-ha and break her neck, if she didn't freeze to death out here.

She'd pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes at him, but he'd folded his arms and loomed over her, looking stern, and she laughed.

"Very well, then. Just before teatime, if you can manage it conveniently. Now go away, Alex MacKenzie, and may God bless you and help you find peace."

He crossed himself now, thinking of her—and caught a look of horror from one of the kitchen maids, coming

through the back gate of Argus House with a long paper-wrapped parcel that undoubtedly contained fish. Not only a Hielandman in the house, but a Papist, too! He smiled at her, gave her a tranquil "Good day," and turned to the left. There were a couple of small sheds near the big glasshouse, probably for the gardeners' use, but it was late enough in the day that the gardeners had gone off for their tea. It *might* do ...

He paused for an instant outside the shed, but heard nothing from within and boldly pushed open the door.

A wave of disappointment passed through him. No, not here. There was a pile of burlap sacks stacked in one corner, the imprint of a body clear upon them, and a jug of beer standing beside it. This was someone's refuge already. He stepped out and closed the door, then on impulse went round behind the shed.

There was a space about two feet wide between the back wall of the shed and the garden wall. Discarded bits of rubbish, broken rakes and hoes, burlap bags of manure filled most of the space—but just within the shelter of the shed, just out of sight of the garden, was an upturned bucket. He sat down on it and let his shoulders slump, feeling truly and blessedly alone for the first time in a week. He'd found his fridstool.

He spent a moment in mindless relief, then said a brief prayer for the repose of Sister Eudoxia's soul. He thought she would not mind a Papist prayer.

She'd died two days after his conversation with her, and he'd spent a wretched night after hearing the news, convinced she'd taken a chill from the cold marble of the folly. He was infinitely relieved to learn from the kitchen gossip next day that she'd died peacefully in her sleep, and he tried to remember her in his regular prayers. It had been some time since he had, though, and he was soothed now to imagine her presence near him. Her peaceful spirit didn't

intrude upon his necessary solitude.

Would it be all right, he wondered suddenly, to ask her to look after Willie while he was gone from Helwater?

It seemed a mildly heretical thought. And yet the thought felt answered at once; it gave him a feeling of ... what? Trust? Confidence? Relief at the sharing of his burden?

He shook his head, half in dismay. Here he sat in an Englishman's rubbish, talking to a dead Protestant nun with whom he'd had two minutes' real conversation, asking her to look after a child who had grandparents, an aunt, and servants by the score, all anxious to keep him from the slightest harm. He himself couldn't have done a thing for William had he been still at Helwater. And yet he felt absurdly better at the notion that someone else knew about William and would help to watch over him.

He sat a few moments, letting his mind relax, and slowly it dawned upon him that the only truly important thing in this imbroglio *was* William. The complications and suspicions and possible dangers of the present situation mattered only insofar as they might prevent his returning to Helwater—no further.

He took a deep breath, feeling better. Aye, with that made clear, it became possible to think logically about the rest. Well, then.

Major Siverly was the ostensible root of this tangle. He was a wicked man, if half what Captain Carruthers had written about him was true, but wicked men of that sort were far from unusual, he thought. Why did the Greys want so badly to get at the man?

John Grey, by his own words, because he felt a sense of obligation to his dead friend Carruthers. Jamie might have doubted that, but given his own conversations with the dead, he was obliged to admit that John Grey might hear his own voices and have his own debts to pay.

What about Pardloe, though? It wasn't Lord John who'd

dragged Jamie to London and was forcing him to go to Ireland after Siverly. Did Pardloe feel such impersonal outrage at Siverly's corruption as to explain his actions? Was it part of his ideal of the army, of his own profession, that he could not bear such a man to be tolerated in it? Or was he doing it primarily to support his brother's quixotic quest?

Jamie admitted reluctantly that it might be all these things. He didn't pretend to understand the complexities of Pardloe's character, but he had strong evidence of the man's sense of family honor. He himself was alive only because of it.

But why him? Why did the Greys need him?

For the poem, first. The Wild Hunt, in Erse. That much, he could see. For while the Greys might have found someone among the Scottish or Irish regiments who had the *Gàidhlig*, it would be indiscreet—and possibly dangerous, given that they hadn't known what the document contained—to put knowledge of it in the hands of someone they couldn't control as they did Lally and him.

He grimaced at the thought of their control but put it aside.

So. Having brought him to London to translate the verse, was it then merely economical to make further use of him? That made sense only if Lord John actually required assistance to apprehend Siverly, and Jamie was not sure that he did. Whatever else you liked to say about the man, he was a competent soldier.

If it was a straight matter of showing Siverly the order to appear at a court-martial and escorting him there, John Grey could plainly do that without Jamie Fraser's help. Likewise, if it were a matter of arresting the man, a detachment of soldiers would accomplish it fine.

Ergo, it wasn't a straightforward matter. What the devil did they expect to happen? He closed his eyes and breathed slowly, letting the warm sweet fumes of well-rotted manure help to focus his mind.

Siverly might well simply refuse to come back with Lord John to England. Rather than face a court-martial, he might resign his commission and either stay in Ireland or depart—as so many had—to take service with a foreign army or to live abroad; peculation on the scale Pardloe had shown him must have given Siverly the means for that.

Should he so refuse—or hear of the matter beforehand and escape—then Jamie might be of use in finding or taking the man, yes. With a bit of practice, he'd likely get along in the *Gaeilge* well enough; he could make inquiries—and his way—in places where the Greys couldn't. And then there was the matter of connections. There were Jacobites in Ireland and in France who would show him courtesy for the sake of the Stuarts, as well as his own name, but who would turn a closed face and a deaf ear to the Greys, no matter what the virtue of their quest. Despite himself, his brain began to compile a list of names, and he shook his head violently to stop it.

Yes, he *might* be useful. But was the possibility of Siverly's flight enough?

He remembered what Lord John had said about Quebec. Siverly had saved John Grey's life during the battle there. He supposed Lord John might find it an embarrassment to arrest Siverly and thus prefer Jamie to haul him back to England. He would have thought that notion funny, had he not had firsthand experience with the Grey family's sense of honor.

Even that ... but there was a third possibility, wasn't there?

Siverly might fight. And Siverly might be killed.

"Jesus, Lord," he said softly.

What if Pardloe wanted Siverly killed? The possibility once named seemed as sure to him as if he'd seen it written down in rhymed couplets. Whatever the duchess had seemed to be saying to him in her nocturnal visit, there was something in the Siverly affair that touched her deeply—and what touched her, touched the duke.

He'd no idea what the connection was between the duchess and Edward Twelvetrees, but he was sure it was there. And the duchess had told him that Edward Twelvetrees was an intimate of Siverly's. Something moved in the web surrounding him, and he could feel the warning twitch of the sticky strand wrapped round his foot.

He took a long breath and let it out slowly.

In the cold light of logic, the answer was obvious—one answer, at least. Jamie was here because he was expendable. Better: because he could be made not to exist.

No one cared what became of a prisoner of war, especially not one held for so long, in such remote circumstances. The Dunsanys would not complain if he never came back, nor ask what had happened to him. His sister and Ian might—well, they would—make inquiries, but it would be a simple matter merely to inform them that he'd died of the flux or something, and leave it at that. They'd have no way of pursuing the matter or discovering the truth, even if they suspected they'd been lied to.

And if he were obliged to kill Siverly—or if it could be made to look as though he had—he shivered. He could be tried and hanged for it, if they cared to make the matter public; what would his word count for? Or John Grey could simply cut his throat and leave him sunk in an Irish bog, once he'd served his purpose, and tell the world what he liked.

He felt hot and cold together and found that he must make a conscious effort to keep breathing.

He'd thought that it would be a simple if annoying matter: do what Pardloe demanded, and be then returned to Helwater and William. But if it came to this ...

Some sound made him open his eyes, to see John Grey standing in front of him, openmouthed.

"I ... beg your pardon," Grey said, recovering himself with some effort. "I did not mean to disturb—"

"What the bloody hell are ye doing here!?" Without intent, he found himself on his feet, his fist bunched in Grey's shirtfront. Grey smartly jerked his forearm up, breaking Jamie's hold, and stepped back, stuffing his rumpled shirt back into his waistcoat.

"You are without doubt the touchiest son of a bitch I have ever encountered," Grey said, his face flushed. "And I include in that roster such men as my brother and the King of Prussia. Can you not behave like a civil being for more than ten minutes together?"

"Touchy, is it?" The blood was pounding in Jamie's temples, and it took some effort to keep his fists curled at his sides.

"I grant you, your situation is invidious," Grey said, making an obvious effort at conciliation. "I admit the provocation. However—"

"Invidious. Is that what ye call it? I am to be your cat's-paw. To preserve what ye're pleased to call your honor." He felt so far beyond fury that he spoke with perfect calm. "And ye call it provoking?"

"What?" Grey seized Jamie's sleeve as he made to turn away, and withstood the look of contempt directed at him. "What the *devil* do you mean by that?"

He jerked his sleeve out of Grey's hand.

"I speak English as well as you do, ye bloody coward, and ye take my meaning fine!"

Grey drew breath, and Jamie could see the thoughts cross the Englishman's face in rapid succession: the urge to lunge at him, the urge to make it more formal and call him out, a rush of unnameable calculation, and, finally—all within the space of a moment—a sudden clamping down, a forcible cooling of fury.

"Sit," Grey said through his teeth, jerking his head at the

bucket.

"I am not a dog!"

Grey rubbed a hand over his face. "A casual observer might argue the point," he said. "But, no. I apologize for the implication. Come with me." He turned away, adding over his shoulder, "If you please, Mr. Fraser."

After a moment's hesitation, Jamie followed the man. There was no point in remaining with the garden rubbish, after all.

Grey pushed open the door of the glasshouse and beckoned him inside. It was near twilight, but the place glowed like a king's treasure, reds and pinks and whites and yellows glimmering in an emerald jungle in the dusk, and the air flooded in upon him, moist and caressing, filled with the scents of flowers and leaves, herbs and vegetables. For an instant, he smelled his wife's hair among them and gulped air as though he'd been shot in the lung.

Pulsing with agitation, he followed Grey past a group of palms and gigantic things with leaves like the ragged ears of elephants. Round a corner, a group of wicker furniture stood beneath an enormous arbor covered with grapevines. Grey stopped short here and turned to him.

"I've had a bloody long day, and I want to sit down," he said. "You can suit yourself." He promptly collapsed into a basket chair and leaned back, thrust out his booted feet, and closed his eyes with a little sigh.

Jamie hesitated, not knowing whether to turn on his heel and leave, sit down in his turn, or pull John Grey out of the chair by his collar and punch him.

"We'll have a half hour or so of privacy here," Grey said, not opening his eyes. "The cook's already come for the vegetables, and Minerva's hearing Benjamin's recitation of Caesar. She won't come for the table flowers 'til he's done, and he's doing *De Bello Gallico*; he never gets past *Fere libenter homines id quod volunt credunt* without losing his

place and having to start over."

Jamie recognized the passage without difficulty: *Men always believe what they wish to believe*. He pressed his lips tight together and sat down in the other basket chair, wicker creaking under his weight. Grey opened his eyes.

"Now. What exactly do you mean," he said, sitting up straight, "about cat's-paws and my so-called honor?"

The brief walk through the glasshouse and Grey's unexpected equanimity had defused something of Jamie's rage, but nothing had changed the conclusions he'd come to.

He considered it for a moment, but, after all, what was to be gained by keeping those conclusions to himself? Forewarned was forearmed, after all, and it might be no bad thing for the Greys to know he *was* forewarned.

He told Grey, shortly, what he'd been thinking and the conclusions to which he'd come, leaving out only the duchess's visit to his room—and William.

Grey listened, sitting quite still, with no change of expression until Jamie had finished. Then he rubbed a hand hard over his face and said, "Damn Hal!" under his breath.

The grapevines had been cut back for winter, but the new spring growth was well sprouted, delicate rusty leaves deckling the rough-knuckled vines that roped through the arbor. A faint draft moved through the rich air of the glasshouse, ruffling the leaves.

"Right," Grey said, dropping his hand. "You aren't a cat's-paw, to begin with. A stalking horse, perhaps. And for what the assurance is worth, I had nothing to do with your presence here, let alone the notion that you should accompany me to Ireland." He paused. "Do you believe that?" he asked, looking intently at Jamie.

"I do," Jamie said, after a brief silence.

"Good. I am, however, probably to blame for the fact that you *are* involved in this situation. My brother wished me to take that blasted poem to Helwater and request you to translate it. I refused, whereupon he took matters into his own hands." He made a small gesture, indicating exasperated resignation.

"My interest in the matter is exactly what Hal told you. My friend Carruthers entrusted me with the job of bringing Major Siverly to a court-martial, and I *will* do that." He paused once more. "Do you believe me?"

"Aye, I do," Jamie said reluctantly. "But His Grace ..."

"My brother does not let go of things," Grey observed. "You may have noticed that."

"I have."

"But he is not, to the best of my knowledge, either a murderer or an unprincipled knave."

"I'm obliged to take your word for it, Colonel."

"You may," Grey said politely. "He can—and will, I'm afraid—use you to accomplish his ends regarding Siverly, but those ends do not include either kidnapping or murder, and he intends you no harm. In fact"—he hesitated for a moment, but then firmed his jaw and went on, eyes fixed on the hands that hung between his knees—"should this venture end in success, I think I can promise you that you will ... benefit from it."

"In what way?" Jamie asked sharply.

"As to that ... I cannot make specific promises without consulting my brother and ... perhaps other people. But I do promise that you will not be harmed by the ... association."

Jamie made a noise in his throat, on the verge of rudeness, indicating what he thought of the Greys' promises, and Grey's head snapped up, his eyes direct, their pale blue darkened by the fading light.

"Either you take me at my word, Mr. Fraser," he said, "or you don't. Which is it?"

Jamie met his eyes and didn't look away. The light had dimmed to a sea of gray-green dusk, but the flush that rose now in Grey's face was still visible. It was the same dim light that had lain between them in the stable at Helwater, the last time they had spoken privately.

The last time he had taken Grey at his word. He had come within an inch of killing the man then—and both of them recalled that moment vividly.

Grey had said on that occasion, his voice barely audible with his passion, "I tell you, sir—were I to take you to my bed —I could make you scream. And by God, I would do it."

Jamie had swung with all his force, by simple reflex—not so much at Grey, but at the memory of Jack Randall that Grey's words unleashed in him—and had, by a miracle, missed. He sat without moving now, every muscle in his body hard as rock and aching with the memory of violence, of Jack Randall, and of what had happened in the dungeon of Wentworth prison.

Neither one of them would—or could—look away. There were sounds in the garden, people moving to and fro, the door to the house slamming, a distant treble of children's voices.

"Why did ye follow me?" Jamie asked at last. The words didn't seemed to be shaped right; they felt strange in his mouth. "This afternoon."

He saw the look of surprise bloom on Grey's face, pale in the gloom of the grape arbor. And remembered the same look on the man's face when he had opened his eyes half an hour earlier, to see Grey standing in front of him.

"I didn't," Grey said simply. "I was looking for a place to be alone for a bit. And you were there."

Jamie breathed deep and, with an effort that felt like lifting a cannon, rose to his feet.

"I'll take ye at your word," he said, and went out.



It had been a long day. Grey dressed for the evening meal,

feeling tired but at peace, as though he had climbed some arduous peak and found himself now safe upon its summit. There might be more mountains to climb tomorrow, but for the moment the sun had gone down, the campfire had been lit, and he could eat his supper with an easy mind.

Tom Byrd was packing; they would leave in the morning for Dublin, and the room was strewn with stockings, hairbrushes, powder, shirts, and whatever else Tom considered essential to the credit of his employer's public appearance. Grey never would have believed that all of these items would fit into one trunk and a couple of portmanteaux, had he not seen Tom accomplish the feat repeatedly.

"Have you packed up Captain Fraser already?" he asked, pulling on his stockings.

"Oh, yes, me lord," Tom assured him. "Everything save what he's wearing—and his nightshirt, to be sure," he added as an afterthought. "I did *try* to make him wear powder for supper," he said, with an air of reproach. "He says it makes him sneeze."

Grey laughed and went down, meeting Hal on the stairs. His brother brandished a small book at him.

"Look what I've got!"

"Let me see ... No! Where did you get it?"

"It" was a copy of Harry Quarry's book of poetry, entitled *Certain Verses Upon the Subject of Eros*. The original, which Grey had presented to Denis Diderot, had been bound in calfskin, whereas this copy was a much cheaper version, done with plain buckram covers, and selling—according to the cover—at half a shilling a copy.

"Mr. Beasley had it. He says he bought it at Stubbs's printshop, in Fleet Street. I recognized it instantly from the title and sent him off to get me a copy. Have you read it?"

"No, I hadn't the chance—only heard a few choice bits that Diderot read out over the piss pot ... Oh, Christ!" He'd flipped the book open at random and now read out, "Bent

upon scratching his unseemly itch / This self-fellating son of a bitch ..."

Hal gave a strangled whoop and laughed so hard that he had to lean momentarily against the wall for support. "Self-fellating? Is that even possible?"

"You're asking me? I certainly can't do it," said Grey.

"I havena any personal experience in that regard myself," said a dry Scottish voice behind him, "but dogs dinna seem to find it difficult."

Both Greys swung round, startled; they hadn't heard him approach. He looked well, John thought, with a slight sense of pride. Upon Fraser's arrival, Minnie had sent hastily to the Pettigrews, who kept a pair of immense blackamoor servants to carry their sedan chair, and borrowed a fairly new suit of livery. The shirt had been washed, starched, and ironed and the plain coat and waistcoat well brushed, and while neither the color—a deep navy blue—nor style were what a fashionable gentleman would wear, it suited Fraser's own vivid coloring amazing well.

"It *is* possible, though," Fraser added, coming even with them. "For a man, I mean."

Hal had straightened up at Fraser's arrival but didn't abandon his own amusement, smiling broadly at Fraser's remark.

"Really? Dare I ask how you come by this knowledge, Captain?"

Fraser's mouth twitched slightly, and he shot a glance at Grey. He answered Hal readily, though.

"On one memorable evening in Paris, some years ago, I was the guest of the Duc di Castellotti, a gentleman with ... individual tastes. He took a number of his dinner guests on a tour of some of the city's more interesting establishments, one of which featured a pair of acrobats. Extremely"—he paused—"flexible." Hal laughed and turned to his brother.

"D'you think Harry's writing from personal experience, John?"

"It's my impression that Colonel Quarry has considerable experience of various kinds upon which to draw," Fraser said, before John could answer. "Though I shouldna have taken him for a man of letters. D'ye mean to say that he composed that remarkable bit o' verse?"

"Astonishingly enough, yes," Hal said. "And quite a lot more of a similar nature, if I am to believe the reports. Wouldn't think it to look at him, would you?"

Hal had turned, quite naturally, with a lift of the shoulder that invited Fraser to walk beside him, and they now went down the corridor, conversing in a pleasant manner, leaving Grey to follow, book in hand.

Minnie had gone out to the theater with a friend, and the men dined alone, in a surprising atmosphere of friendliness. There was no sign of wariness or resentment in Fraser's manner; he behaved with immense civility, as though the Greys were cordial acquaintances. Grey felt a sense of grateful astonishment; evidently Fraser had meant it when he said he would take Grey at his word.

Master me. Or let me your master be.

He thought he would settle for mutual respect—and, for the first time since Hal had put this scheme in hand, began to look forward to Ireland.

SECTION III



Beast in View



The Return of Tobias Quinn

"Is he all right, me lord?" Tom asked in lowered voice, nodding toward the dock. Turning, Grey saw Fraser standing there like a great rock in the middle of a stream, obliging hands and passengers to flow around him. Despite his immobility, there was something in his face that reminded Grey irresistibly of a horse about to bolt, and by instinct he fought his way down the gangway and laid a hand on Fraser's sleeve before he could think about it.

"It will be all right," he said. "Come, it will be all right."

Fraser glanced at him, torn from whatever dark thought had possessed him.

"I doubt it," he said, but absently, as though to himself. He didn't pull away from John's hand on his arm, but rather walked out from under it without noticing and trudged up the gangway like a man going to his execution.

The one good thing, Grey reflected a few hours later, was that Tom had quite lost his fear of the big Scot. It wasn't possible to be afraid of someone you had seen rendered so utterly helpless, so reduced by physical misery—and placed in so undignified a position.

"He did tell me once that he was prone to *mal de mer*," Grey said to Tom, as they stood by the rail for a grateful moment of fresh air, despite the lashing of rain that stung their faces.

"I haven't seen a cove that sick since me uncle Morris what was a sailor in a merchant man come down with the hockogrockle," said Tom, shaking his head. "And *he* died of it."

"I am reliably informed that no one actually dies of seasickness," Grey said, trying to sound authoritative and reassuring. The sea was rough, white froth flying from the tops of the surging billows, and the small craft lurched sickeningly from moment to moment, plunging nose down into troughs, only to be hurled abruptly upward by a rising wave. He was a good sailor himself—and smug about it—but if he thought about it for more than a few seconds ...

"Wish I'd a-known," Tom said, his round face creased with worry. "Me old gran says a sour pickle's the thing for seasickness. She made me uncle Morris take a jar of 'em, put up special with dill weed, whenever he set to sea. And he never had seasickness, to start with." He looked at Grey, his expression under the wet seeming to accuse his employer of gross negligence in the provisioning of pickles.

Grey felt himself falling under some kind of horrid trance, as he watched the surface of the ocean rise and fall, rise and fall ...

"Yes," he said faintly. "What a good idea. But perhaps ..."

"Your pardon, your honor," said a voice at his elbow. "Would ye be by way of being friends of the gentleman downstairs what's sick as a dog, and a tremenjous big dog, too?"

Grateful for the distraction, Grey turned his back on the roiling sea and blinked water from his lashes. The Irishman was a few inches taller than himself, but painfully thin. Despite that, sailing seemed to agree with him; his face was ruddy with cold and wind, pale eyes sparkling, and water gleamed in his spray-soaked curls.

"Yes," Grey said. "Is he worse?" He made to go past the man, but his new acquaintance put out a hand, reaching with the other into a capacious cloak that billowed round

him like a cloud.

"If he was any the worse for it, he'd be dead," the Irishman said, bringing out a small, square black bottle. "I only wondered, would ye maybe accept a bit o' medicine for him? I offered it to him meself, only he was too far gone to answer."

"I thank you, sir," Grey said, accepting the bottle. "Er ... what is it, if you please?"

"Mostly bad whisky," the Irishman said frankly. "But with the ginger-root and a small little spoon of powdered opium stirred into it, as well." He smiled, showing a missing eyetooth. "Works wonders, it does. But do shake it first."

"What have we got to lose?" Tom said practically. He gestured at the deck, now thronged with passengers who had emerged from the companionway, driven upward by the insalubrious conditions in the cramped space below. Many of them were hanging over the rail themselves; the rest glared at Grey, plainly holding him responsible.

"If we don't do something about him prompt-like, one of that lot's a-going to knock him on the head. *And* us."



Jamie heard footsteps approaching and hoped fervently that whoever it was intended to shoot him; he'd heard a few such intentions expressed within his hearing recently. He was all for it but lacked the strength to say so.

"A bit under the weather, are ye, now?" He cracked one eye open, to see Toby Quinn's beaming face bending over him, surrounded by crazily fluttering shadows cast by the swinging lanterns. He closed the eye and curled himself into a tighter ball.

"Go away," he managed, before the next wrench of nausea seized him. Quinn leapt nimbly back, just in time, but came forward again, cautiously skirting the fetid little pool surrounding Jamie.

"Now, then, good sir," Quinn said soothingly. "I've a draught here will help."

The word "draught," with its implication of swallowing something, made Jamie's stomach writhe afresh. He clapped a hand to his mouth and breathed through his nose, though it hurt to do so, as spewing bile had seared the sensitive membranes of his nasal passages. He closed his eyes against the horrible rhythmic sway of the shadows. Each one seemed to take his mind swinging with it, leaving his belly poised over some hideous sheer drop.

It won't stop, itwonteverstopohGod ...

"Mr. Fraser." There was a hand on his shoulder. He twitched feebly, trying to get rid of it. If they wouldn't have the decency to kill him, could they not just let him die in peace?

The sense of alarm at Quinn's presence, which would in other circumstances have been pronounced, was so faint as barely to register on the blank slate of his mind. But it wasn't Quinn touching him; it was John Grey. "Take your hand off me," he wanted to say, but couldn't. "Kill you. Take your hand ... kill you ..."

A general chorus of blasphemy greeted the results when he opened his mouth in an attempt to utter the threat. It was followed by more varied response, including a shocked female voice: "Dear bleedin' heart o' Mairy, the poor man's spittin' blood!"

He curled up again, knees clasped as tight to his belly as he could get them. He'd heard himself whimpering and, shocked at the sound, had bitten the inside of his cheek hard to stop it.

The chorus were saying something about the draught, all of them urging him to take it. An uncorked bottle of something hot-smelling and sickly-sweet was waved under his nose. Opium. The word flared a warning in his mind. He'd had opium before, in France. He still remembered the dreams, a nasty mix of lust and nightmare. And he remembered being told that he'd raved in the midst of them, too, talking wildly of the naked demons that he saw. Again, on the crossing to France: he'd been wounded then, and had suffered all those wounds again—and worse—in opium dreams. And what had happened later, at the abbey, when he'd fought the shade of Black Jack Randall in fire and shadow, had done something terrible to him against a stone wall ... that was opium, too.

The whole cabin shot into the air and then fell with shocking violence, flinging people into the bulkheads like birds smashing into windowpanes. Jamie rolled off the bench on which he'd been lying, crashed into several bodies, and ended entangled with one of them, both wedged between the bulkhead and a large sliding crate of chickens that no one had thought to secure.

"Bloody get off me!" A strangled English voice came from somewhere under him and, realizing that it was John Grey he lay on, he rose like a rocket, cracking his head on the low beam above. Clutching his head—obviously shattered—he sank to his knees and fell half upon the crate, to the great consternation of the chickens. Shrieks and squawks and an explosion of down feathers and bits of chicken shit erupted through the slats, in an ammoniac reek that stabbed right through his nose and into what was left of his brain.

He subsided slowly onto the floor, not caring what he lay in. More squawking, this human. Hands. They hauled him half sitting, though he hung like a bag of laundry, unable to help.

"Christ, he's a heavy motherfucker!" said a rough voice in his ear.

"Open your mouth," said another voice, breathless but determined.

Grey, he thought dimly.

Fingers seized his raw nose and squeezed and he yelped, only to choke as a cascade of vile liquid poured into his mouth. Someone cupped his chin and slammed his jaw shut.

"Swallow, for God's sake!"

The whisky burned down his throat and into his chest and, for one brief moment, cleared his mind of the omnipresent nausea. He opened his eyes and caught sight of Quinn, staring at him with an expression of intense concern.

I mustn't speak of him. Mustn't risk it, being muddled. Mustn't speak.

He worked his tongue, gasping for breath, gathering his strength. Then snatched the bottle from John Grey and drained it.



Jamie woke in a rather pleasant state of mind; he couldn't remember who he was, let alone where, but it didn't seem to matter. He was lying on a bed and it wasn't moving. The light in the room flickered like sunlight on waves, but this was in fact the work of a large tree he could see, standing outside the window, fluttering its leaves in a lackadaisical manner. He thought there were not any trees in the ocean but couldn't swear to it, what with the peculiar images still floating languidly now and then across the back of his eyes.

He closed his eyes, the better to examine one of these, which seemed to be a mermaid with three breasts, one of which she was pointing at him in an enticing sort of way.

"Will you be havin' a pot of coffee, sir?" she said. Her breast began to stream black coffee, and her other hand held a dish beneath to catch it.

"Does one o' the other ones squirt whisky?" he asked. There was a sudden gasp in his ear, and he managed to open one eye a crack, squeezing the other closed in order to keep the mermaid in sight, lest she swim off with his coffee. He was looking at a spindly girl in a cap and apron, who was staring at him with her mouth open. She had a long, bony nose, red at the tip. She had a dish of coffee in her hand, too, that was strange. Nay teats at all, though.

"No hope o' cream, then, I suppose," he murmured, and shut the eye.

"You'd best leave him to us, miss," said an English voice, sounding rather self-important.

"Yes," said another, also English, but testy. "Leave the coffee, too, for God's sake."

There was a soft green light about the mermaid, and a small striped fish swam out of her hair, nosing its way down between her breasts. Lucky fish.

"What do you think, me lord?" said the first voice, now dubious. "Cold water down his neck, maybe?"

"Splendid idea," said the second voice, now cordial. "You do it."

"Oh, I shouldn't want to presume, me lord."

"I'm sure he isn't violent, Tom."

"Just as you say, me lord. But he might turn nasty, mightn't he? Gentlemen do, sometimes, after a hard night."

"I trust you do not speak from personal experience, Tom?"

"Certainly not, me lord!"

"Opium doesn't take you like that, anyway," said the second voice, coming nearer. It sounded distracted. "It does give you the most peculiar dreams, though."

"Is he still asleep, do you think?" The first voice was coming nearer, too. He could feel someone's breath on his face. The mermaid took offense at this familiarity and vanished. He opened his eyes, and Tom Byrd, who had been hovering over him with a wet sponge, let out a small shriek and dropped it on his chest.

With a detached sense of interest, he watched his own hand rise into the air and pluck the sponge off his shirt, where it was making a wet patch. He had no particular idea what to do with it next, though, and dropped it on the floor.

"Good morning." John Grey's face came into view behind Tom, wearing an expression of cautious amusement. "Are you feeling somewhat more human this morning?"

He wasn't sure but nodded nonetheless and sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He didn't feel badly, but very strange. There was a wicked taste in his mouth, though, and he held out a hand to Tom Byrd, who was advancing on him slowly, coffee held before him like a flag of truce.

The cup Tom put in his hand was warm, and he sat for a moment, regaining his senses. The air smelled of peat smoke, cooking meat, and something vaguely nasty of a vegetable nature—scorched cabbage. His slow mind located the word.

He took a grateful mouthful of coffee and found a few more words.

"We're in Ireland, then, are we?"

"Yes, thank God. Are you always—" Grey cut himself off. "I am."

"Jesus." Grey shook his head in disbelief. "Rather fortunate that you were not transported after Culloden, then. I doubt you would have survived the voyage."

Jamie gave him a narrow look—it was owing to Grey's personal intervention that he had not been transported, and he hadn't been at all pleased at the time—but evidently Grey meant nothing now beyond the obvious, and he merely nodded, sipping coffee.

A soft knock came at the door, which stood half open, and Quinn's long face came poking round the jamb. Had Jamie's reflexes been halfway normal, he might have dropped the coffee. As it was, he merely sat there, staring stupidly at the Irishman, whose existence he'd forgotten in the maze of opium dreams.

"Beggin' your pardon, good sirs," Quinn said, with an engaging smile round the room. "I hoped to inquire after the

gentleman's welfare, but I see he's quite himself again, may God set a flower on his head."

Quinn advanced into the room, uninvited, but Grey recovered his manners instantly and offered him coffee, then sent Tom down to order up some breakfast, as well.

"It's pleased I am to see ye so far recovered, sir," Quinn said to Jamie, and reached into his pocket, coming out with a corked bottle. He pulled the cork and poured a thin stream of pungent whiskey into Jamie's coffee. "Perhaps this will aid in your complete return to the land o' the living?"

Jamie's sense of self-preservation was jumping up and down somewhere in the back of his mind, trying to attract his attention, but the whiskey was much more immediate. He raised his cup briefly to Quinn, said, "Moran taing," and took a deep gulp, shuddering slightly.

Quinn was chatting easily to John Grey, telling him things about Dublin, asking after Grey's plans, offering to recommend him to the best livery stable in the town.

"Will it be a coach ye'll be needin', sir, or are you after takin' the post chaise?"

"How far is it to Athlone?" Grey asked. Siverly's estate was, by report, within ten miles of Castle Athlone.

"Oh, maybe two days' ride, with the blessing and a good horse. Slower by coach, of course. The post chaise would be one and a bit, but that's if it doesn't rain." Quinn made a quick sign of the horns against this evil thought.

Grey tapped his chin thoughtfully, looking at Jamie.

"I can ride," Jamie assured him, scratching his ribs. He felt fine now—extremely hungry, in fact.

"But there's the baggage to consider, me lord." Tom had popped back into the room, armed with a mug of shaving soap, a folding razor, and a strop.

"Well, yes. You'll have to go by coach with the baggage, Tom. I'm thinking, though, that Captain Fraser and myself might travel by horseback. Quicker, and less chance of being held up by bad roads."

He glanced at Jamie, one eyebrow raised in question.

"Aye, fine." Jamie set aside the empty cup. Now that he was fully awake, his attention was focused more on Quinn than on Grey. He narrowed his eyes at the Irishman, who sedulously ignored him.

"And a fine day for the riding it is, too," said Quinn approvingly. "My own road lies toward Athlone—if you gentleman might find it convenient, you're more than welcome to travel with me, so far as ye like."

Jamie jerked, startling Tom, who was about to apply a brushful of soap to his face.

"I should think we can find our own path," he said, putting up a hand to ward off Tom. "Athlone's not out of the way, from what I understand. Though we thank you for your kindness, sir," he added to Quinn, not wanting to seem churlish. He was in fact strongly inclined to pick Quinn up and decant him swiftly out of the window. The last thing he needed was to have a pixilated Irishman along on this expedition, breathing traitorous suggestions down his neck and distracting his attention while he dealt with Grey and Siverly and whatever else Ireland might have in store for him in the way of trouble.

"Oh, not at all, at all," Quinn said, waving an airy hand. "I'll be setting off just after the Angelus bell—at noon, I mean—should that suit your honors. I'll meet you in the courtyard, aye?"

He moved swiftly out the door before anyone could say anything, then popped his head suddenly back in.

"Darcy's, in the High Street. Tell Hugh Darcy that it's Toby Quinn as sent ye, and he'll see ye mounted on his best."



Grey thought that Quinn had been as good as his word. The

horses provided by Mr. Darcy were sound, well shod, and as well tempered as a livery horse was likely to be. Mr. Quinn himself had turned up at the stable to give advice and had successfully bargained for a decent price. Jamie had given Quinn a narrowed eye, but the man seemed merely kind, if a trifle familiar, and besides, there was no way of preventing his riding out of Dublin along with them—it was a public road, after all.

There was a bit of small talk, as was common among strangers traveling together—Mr. Quinn was bent on business in County Roscommon, he said; an inheritance from a cousin that required the personal touch.

"Are you familiar with County Roscommon, sir?" Grey asked. "Do you perhaps know a gentleman named Siverly? Gerald Siverly."

Quinn looked interested but shook his head.

"Sure, I've heard the name. He's got the fine estate, he has, over near Ballybonaggin. But he wouldn't be knowing the likes of me," he said, with a deprecating grin.

"What is your trade, sir?" Grey asked, though worried that the man might be a gentleman—there was something in his manner that suggested it, though not his dress—and thus might be insulted. Quinn seemed not to take the question amiss, though, and replied equably.

"Oh, a bit of this and a bit o' that, sir—though I make most of my living from the printing of sermons and philosophical works of what ye might call a spiritual nature."

"Did you say something, Mr. Fraser?" Grey turned round in his saddle to look at Fraser, who was following them at the moment.

"I swallowed a gnat," Fraser replied shortly.

"Ah, better that than to be chokin' on a camel, so they say," said Quinn, and laughed at his own wit, though Grey smiled as well.

After a bit, though, conversation ceased, and they went on

at a good pace. Grey sank into his own thoughts, these concerned mostly with the impending interview with Gerald Siverly. Always assuming Siverly was in fact in Ireland and hadn't buggered off to Sweden or India with his ill-gotten gains.

He knew Siverly, very slightly. Had sought him out after the Battle of Quebec to thank him for saving his life, which he'd done by deflecting the blow of a tomahawk that would have brained Grey. Siverly had been quite gracious, and they had shared the necessary glass of wine, but that was the sum total of their relations to date.

That made the current situation a trifle awkward, but Grey had no real scruples over what he was about to do. If Siverly was by some chance innocent—and he didn't see how he could be—then he should be pleased at the chance to clear his name by coming back and answering the charges at a court-martial. Grey had discussed his plans—some of them—with Hal, and they had thought that this was the best tack to take, perhaps: an apparent assumption on his part of Siverly's innocence, with earnest representations as to the desirability of facing down these infamous accusations.

Siverly might find it awkward to refuse to accompany Grey, under those circumstances. If he did have the brass neck to refuse, though, Grey had pointed out to his brother that it would be as well to have another plan—or two—in place. Was there anything useful with which he could threaten Siverly?

Yes, he could point out that Siverly risked expulsion from his regiment if the charges went unanswered—to say nothing of expulsion from his clubs, if he belonged to any, and from society in general. Hal made a decent threat, himself; Grey could suggest—with complete truth—that his brother, the duke, was upset by the seriousness of the charges and might bring a question in the House of Lords, but being a reasonable man (he grinned to himself at that) would

certainly be willing to meet with Major Siverly. Grey might delicately suggest that in that case, a court-martial might be avoided.

Not bad, he thought judiciously, reliving the conversation with Hal. If neither personal appeal to honor nor threat to reputation worked, he could then turn to official channels; the Justiciar of Athlone Castle was the highest authority within easy reach of Siverly's estate, and Grey had provided himself with a letter of introduction from Hal, as well as a copy of Carruthers's packet of evidence. The justiciar might be persuaded that the charges were sufficiently serious as to arrest Siverly and commit him to Grey's authority. And if all else failed, there was Plan C, which involved a certain amount of physical intimidation and would require the services of Jamie Fraser.

It didn't seem useful to plan in further detail until he actually saw Siverly, though, and could judge better how he might respond. He therefore let his mind relax, enjoying the soft, moist air and the beautiful green of the countryside. Behind him, he heard Jamie ask Mr. Quinn, in tones of earnest inquiry, what he thought the most interesting sermon he had printed, but being himself uninterested in sermons, spurred up and left them to it.



Tower House

It was a soft night, too, and damp, with the lithe chill of spring moving in the air. Grey lay wrapped in his cloak in a shallow declivity, his rustic couch lined thick with grass and tiny star-shaped flowers, wondering whether he was about to die.

Night had come upon them in open country, and while debating the wisdom of pressing on to the next hamlet or turning back to the last crossroads, in hope of finding shelter for the night at a cottage, Quinn had suggested that as it was not raining, they might do worse than take shelter by a túrtheach he knew.

They'd passed two or three of these ruined tower houses on the journey from Dublin, tall bleak remnants of the Middle Ages. No more than shells now, crumbling, roofless, and black with damp, the tenacious dark ivy that crawled up their walls the only sign of life. This tower was much the same—though it had a well, this being Quinn's chief reason for recommending it, they having finished the ale Tom had packed for them.

They found the well, marked by a rough circle of stones, just within the tower's walls. Jamie Fraser had tied a string to his canteen and dropped it down to the dark water six feet below, then brought it up and sniffed at it with a long, suspicious nose before taking a cautious sip.

"I think nothing's died in it lately."

"Well and good," said Quinn. "We'll say a prayer, then, and slake our thirst, shall we?"

To Grey's surprise, both his companions promptly bowed their heads over the crude well coping and murmured something. The words weren't the same—they appeared each to be speaking his own language—but the rhythm was similar. Grey was unsure whether this was a prayer of thanksgiving for the provision of water or some ceremonial invocation against being poisoned by it, but he obligingly fixed his eyes on the ground and waited in silence until it was done.

They'd hobbled the horses and set them to graze on the lush grass, then supped themselves, decently if not luxuriously, on bread and cheese and dried apples. There hadn't been much talk over the food; it had been a long day in the saddle, and they sought their beds soon after.

He'd fallen promptly asleep; the ability to sleep anywhere, instantly, was a soldier's talent, and one he'd acquired very early in his career. And then had wakened some unknown time later, heart thumping and hairs erect, clutching for the dagger in his belt.

He had no idea what had wakened him and lay quite still, listening for all he was worth. Then there was a rustling of the grass nearby, quite loud, and he tensed himself to roll away and spring to his feet. Before he could move, though, there came the swish of moving feet and the hiss of a Scottish whisper.

"Are ye mad? Drop it, or I break your arm."

There was a startled huff of air and the faint thump of something hitting the ground. Grey lay frozen, waiting.

"Hush, man." Quinn's voice came to him, barely louder than the sigh of the wind. "Ye don't want to wake him."

"Oh, that I do, if ye were doing what I think ye were."

"Not here. Come away, for God's sake!"

The sound of breathing, hesitance, then the quiet sough of feet through thick grass as they moved off.

Very quietly, Grey rolled onto his knees, shucking off his cloak. He took the pistol from the bag he'd been using for a pillow, rose, and followed, matching the rhythm of his movements to theirs. The moon had set, but he could see them by starlight, twenty yards ahead: Fraser a looming mass against the paler ground, Quinn so close beside him that he thought Fraser might be grasping the Irishman by the arm, pulling him along.

They went around the ruined tower and essentially disappeared, no longer visible against the dark bulk of its stone. He stood still, not breathing, until he heard them again.

"Now, then." Fraser's voice came clearly to him, soft but with the anger clear in it. "What the devil d'ye mean by this?"

"We don't need him." Grey noted with interest that Quinn didn't sound frightened—merely persuasive. "You don't need him, Mo chara."

"There are a good many folk in the world I don't need, including you, ye wee gomerel. If I thought it right to kill them on that account, I'd have done awa' wi' you before we left London."

Grey blinked at that and felt a cold finger down his back. So Quinn had been in touch with Jamie in London? How? Had Jamie sought him out? What had Fraser told him—and why had he joined their company? And why had Fraser not told Grey that he knew Quinn before? He swallowed bile and moved a little closer, fingering the pistol. It was loaded but not primed, because of the damp.

"If he's dead, ye could disappear, *Mac Dubh*. Nothing easier. Ye're safe out of England now; I've more than one place in Ireland where ye could lie hidden for a bit, or ye could go across to France should ye feel the need—but who

would hunt ye?"

"That man's brother, for one," Fraser said coldly. "Ye've not had the benefit of meeting His Grace the Duke of Pardloe, but I'd sooner be hunted by the fiend himself. Did it never occur to you to ask if I thought it a good idea to kill the Englishman?"

"Thought I'd save ye the trouble, *Mac Dubh*." Quinn sounded amused, damn him!

"Dinna be calling me Mac Dubh."

"I know ye've a tender conscience, so ye have. Another minute and I'd have had him taken care of and tucked away safe down the well. Ye'd have no call to worry yourself."

"Oh, aye? And what then? Did ye mean to tell me, or just give it out that he'd changed his mind and gone off on foot?"

"Oh, I'd have told you, sure. What d'ye take me for, *Mac Dubh*?"

There was a moment of marked silence.

"What d'ye owe him?" Quinn demanded, breaking it. "Him or his brother? The swarthy-johns have imprisoned ye, enslaved ye! Taken your land, killed your kin and your comrades—"

"After saving my life, aye." Fraser's voice had grown dry; he was losing the edge of his anger, Grey thought, and wondered whether that was a good thing.

He wasn't really concerned that Quinn would talk Fraser round; he knew Fraser's innate stubbornness much too well. He was a trifle worried that Fraser might not talk the Irishman round, though—he didn't fancy lying sleepless night after night, expecting a knife in the back or his throat cut at any moment. He felt in the pocket of his coat for the small brass powder horn he carried ... just in case.

Fraser gave a deep, exasperated sigh.

"Look ye," he said, in a low, firm voice. "I've given my word in this. If ye dare to dishonor me by killing the Englishman, I tell ye flat, Quinn—it'll be you joining him at

the bottom of a well."

Well, that was some relief. Fraser might or might not want him dead—certainly he *had*, at various points of their acquaintance with each other—but he wasn't willing to have him assassinated. Grey supposed he should be affronted by the implication that it was only Fraser's fear of dishonor or Hal that was keeping Grey alive, but under the circumstances ...

Quinn muttered something sulky that Grey didn't catch, but his submission was clear. Grey didn't let go of the powder horn but didn't take it out of his pocket, either; his thumb rubbed back and forth, restless on the line of engraving round the rim.

Acta non verba, it said: action, not words. The breeze had changed direction, and he could no longer hear clearly. Mumbling, disconnected words, and he edged a little closer, pressing near the dank stones of the wall.

"... he's in the way of our business." Those words came clear, and Grey stopped abruptly. He was still clutching the powder horn in his pocket.

"You and I have nay business. I've told ye that a dozen times."

"Ye think so, do ye?" Quinn's voice was rising; he was striving for the effect of anger, Grey thought with interest, but was not truly angry. "It's the business of every true Catholic, every true man!"

"Ye'll gang your own way, Quinn, and I shallna hinder ye. But I've my own business to see to, and ye'll not stand in my way, either. D'ye hear me?"

Quinn snorted, but had obviously heard.

"Oidhche mhath," Fraser said quietly, and Grey heard footsteps come in his direction. He pressed flat against the tower, hoping that the Scot would not pass downwind of him; he harbored a sudden irrational conviction that Fraser could smell his sweat—for despite the cool of the night,

drops ran tickling down his ribs and matted the hair to the back of his neck—and would hunt him like a Highland stag.

But Fraser sheered off and went into the tower, muttering under his breath in the Scottish sort of Gaelic, and a moment later Grey heard splashing sounds. Presumably Fraser dashing water in his face to cool his anger.

He heard nothing from the other direction and could not see Quinn among the shadows. Perhaps the man had gone off to settle his own pique or was simply sitting there brooding. In any case, he seized the opportunity to peel himself off the wall and make his way back to his sleeping place, lest either of the irascible Gaels come looking for him.

Only as he approached the dark puddle of his discarded cloak did he become aware that he was still clutching the pistol in one hand, the other still clenched, aching, round the powder horn in his pocket. Letting go, he put away the pistol and sat down, rubbing his thumb across the palm of his hand, where he could clearly feel the word "Acta" embossed in the flesh.



He lay awake until dawn, watching the hazy stars fade from the sky, but no one disturbed him. His thoughts, though, were another matter.

He clung to the minor reassurance provided by his recollection that Jamie Fraser had tried to prevent Quinn from accompanying them—and that he, Grey, had airily overridden his objections. That meant that whatever Quinn had in mind, Fraser presumably was not part of it.

But he knows what it is. And had refrained from telling Grey about it. But that might be innocent, if Fraser hadn't expected Quinn to attack Grey.

"He's in the way of our business," the Irishman had said, apparently meaning Grey himself. What the devil was the

"business," and how was his presence an interference with it?

Well, there were clues. Quinn's reference to "every true Catholic, every true man," for instance. That had the smell of Jacobitism about it. And while the Stuarts' cause had been decisively crushed in the Highlands fifteen years before, Grey did know that there were sputtering plots still smoldering in Ireland—all over the Continent, for that matter: France, Italy, Spain ... One of them now and then erupted into brief flame before being stamped out, but it had been a year or two since he'd heard of anything active.

Thomas Lally came suddenly to mind, as did what Minnie had said about that bloody verse. A white rose, the Jacobite symbol. Fraser hadn't mentioned the white rose, nor had Lally. And Lally had been one of Charles Stuart's officers before going off to involve himself with the French. What had Lally and Fraser said to each other in those brief sentences of stilted Erse?

Grey closed his eyes briefly in dismay. More bloody Jacobites? Would they never give up?

By what Fraser said, he had met Quinn in London. So much for Hal's insistence that Fraser be treated as a gentleman and not a prisoner, allowed to walk out freely as he liked!

"Serve you right if that Irish blackguard had cut my throat," he muttered to his absent brother.

Still, this was beside the point. The important thing, he reminded himself, was that Jamie didn't want him dead—a warming thought—and had stopped Quinn from killing him.

Would that continue to be the case, if he spoke directly to Fraser about the matter?

As he saw it, he had only two alternatives: say nothing, watch them, and do his best never to sleep ... or talk to Jamie Fraser. He scratched his chest meditatively. He could go one night without sleep, possibly two. That would bring

them within reach of Siverly. But he didn't wish to face Gerald Siverly exhausted and fuzzy-minded.

While Fraser's reasons for not allowing Quinn to kill him were neither personal nor flattering, another point was that he plainly wanted nothing to do with what Quinn intended—but Quinn needed or wanted Fraser to be involved with it.

The air about him was still black-dark, but it had shifted, rising in some way, the night beginning to lift, restless to depart. At some distance, he heard the small sounds of a man waking: a cough, the clearing of a throat, a soft groan as gravity made its fresh demands. He couldn't tell which man it was, but both of them would doubtless make their presence known as soon as it was light, looking for breakfast.

If Quinn suspected anything, he might well try to kill Grey regardless of Jamie's threat. Just how well did the Irishman know Jamie? Grey wondered. Anyone who knew him well would take him at his word—but someone who didn't might not.

Quinn did know him, though. He'd called him "Mac Dubh." That's what the prisoners at Ardsmuir had called Fraser; Grey had heard it often enough that he'd asked one of the Gaelic-speaking orderlies what it meant. "Son of the Black One," he'd been told, in a matter-of-fact way. He'd wondered at the time whether this was a satanic reference of some sort, but it didn't seem so, from his informant's attitude. Perhaps it was a literal reference to some aspect of Fraser's father's character or appearance, and he spared an instant to wonder what Fraser's father had been like.

The horses were drowsing under the tower wall; one of them released a long, rumbling fart and another shook its head, mane flapping. Now the birds were at it, tentative chirps from the distant hedgerows.

He'd talk to Fraser.



After some thought, Grey decided that directness was the simplest way of obtaining privacy.

"Mr. Quinn," he said pleasantly, when the Irishman came back from his morning ablutions, water droplets shining in his curls. "I need to discuss various aspects of our business with Mr. Fraser before we arrive at Athlone. Would you do me the favor of riding on? We shall follow shortly and catch you up before noon."

The Irishman looked startled and glanced quickly at Jamie, who gave no indication that this was an out-of-the-way request, then looked back to Grey and nodded awkwardly.

"Certainly."

Grey thought that Quinn was not a particularly experienced *intrigant* and hoped he had even less experience as an assassin. On the other hand, it wasn't necessarily a job requiring skill. More, of course, if your victim was forewarned. He smiled at Quinn, who looked taken aback.

Breakfast was even more cursory than supper had been, though Jamie toasted two pieces of bread with cheese between, so that the cheese melted, something Grey hadn't seen before but thought very tasty. Quinn mounted up without comment afterward and headed back to the road.

Grey sat on a moss-covered rock, watching until the Irishman had got well away, then swiveled back to face Fraser, who was tidily rolling up a pair of stockings into a ball.

"I woke up last night," he said without preamble.

Fraser stuffed the stockings into his portmanteau and reached for the heel of bread, which followed the stockings.

"Did you," he said, not looking up.

"Yes. One question—does Mr. Quinn know the nature of our business with Siverly?"

Fraser hesitated a moment before answering.

"Probably not." He looked up, eyes a startlingly deep blue. "If he does, he didna hear it from me."

"Where the devil else might he have heard it?" Grey demanded, and Fraser glared at him.

"From your brother's servants, I imagine. That's where he learned that ye had business in Ireland and that I was to go with ye."

Grey blinked, but it was all too likely. He'd sent Tom Byrd often enough to extract information from other people's servants.

"How did he come to be in London?"

Fraser's eyes narrowed, but he answered.

"He followed me, when your brother had me taken from Helwater. And if ye want to know how he came to be at Helwater, ye'll need to ask him, because I don't know."

Grey raised one brow; if Fraser didn't know, he probably could make a damned good guess, but it wasn't necessary to go into that. Not now, at least.

Fraser stood up suddenly and, picking up the portmanteau, went to saddle his horse. Grey followed.

They made their way back to the road; Quinn was well out of sight. It was a beautiful morning, with the birds whose tentative chirpings had greeted the dawn now gone mad, swooping to and fro overhead and whooping out of the meadows in riotous flocks, flushed by their passage. The road was wide enough to ride side by side, and they continued in that fashion for a quarter of an hour or so before Grey spoke again.

"Will you swear to me that Quinn's matter does not threaten either our intent with regard to Major Siverly or the safety of England?"

Fraser gave him a sidelong glance. "No," he said bluntly.

Grey wouldn't have believed any other answer, but the bluntness—and its implications—gave him a mild shock. "Which is it?" he asked after a moment. "Or is it both?"

Fraser inhaled strongly through his nose, like a man much tried.

"Quinn's affairs are his own, Colonel. If he has secrets, they are not mine to share."

Grey gave a short laugh. "That's nicely phrased," he said. "Do you imply that you are in ignorance of Quinn's aims? Or that you know what he's up to but your sense of honor prevents your telling me?"

"Take your choice." Fraser's lips thinned, and his eyes stayed fixed on the road ahead.

They rode in silence for a bit. The lush green of the countryside was monotonous and soothing but was having little effect on Grey's temper.

"I suppose it is frivolous to point out that assisting the king's enemies—even by inaction—is treason," he remarked eventually.

"It is not frivolous to point out that I am a convicted traitor," Fraser replied evenly. "Are there judicial degrees of that crime? Is it additive? Because when they tried me, all they said was 'treason' before putting a rope around my neck."

"A rope ... but you were not sentenced to hanging, were you?" It was certainly possible; a good many Jacobites had been executed, but a good many more had had their sentences commuted to transportation or imprisonment.

"No." Fraser's color was already high, from sun and wind. It became noticeably deeper. For a moment, Grey thought that was all he meant to say on the matter, but after another moment the words burst out of him, as though he could not contain them.

"They marched me—us—from Inverness to Ardsmuir. With ropes about our necks, to show that our lives were forfeit, given back to us only by the generosity"—he choked, actually choked, on the word, and shook his head, clearing his throat with violence—"the generosity of the king."

He kicked his horse suddenly; it snorted and jolted a little way ahead, then, lacking further stimulus from its rider, lapsed back into a trot, looking curiously over its shoulder at Grey and his mount, as though wondering how they'd got so far behind.

Grey rode for a bit, turning half a dozen things over in his mind at once, then nudged his horse, which was already attempting to catch up with its fellow, not liking to be left.

"Thank you," he said, coming even with Fraser again. "For not allowing the Irishman to kill me."

Fraser nodded, not turning his head. "You're welcome."

"May I expect this courtesy to continue?"

He could have sworn that the corner of Fraser's mouth twitched. "You may."

Quinn was visible now, a quarter mile ahead. He had turned aside to wait for them, and was leaning on a stile, chatting to a cottager who was holding a small white pig, by his gestures evidently displaying the animal's finer points.

They had almost reached Quinn when Fraser spoke again, turning this time to look at him, his face now cool-skinned and sober.

"Ye'll do what ye have to, Colonel. And so shall I."



Castle Athlone

Athlone Castle was black and squat. It reminded Grey vaguely of an oasthouse, those cone-shaped structures in Kent where hops were dried. Much bigger, though.

"Something of a family seat," he said to Jamie, joking. "One of my ancestors built it, back in the thirteenth century. Justiciar John de Gray, he was called."

"Oh, aye? Was your family Irish, then?"

"No," Grey admitted. "English back to the Conquest, largely Normans before that. Though I do have that one disreputable Scottish connection, of course." His mother's father had been Scottish, from one of the powerful Border families.

Fraser snorted. He didn't think much more of Lowlanders than of Englishmen.

Quinn had gracefully taken leave of them once in Athlone and gone off with vague murmurs of looking up a friend—and the assurance that he would rejoin them in the morning, to see them along their way. Grey rather resented the implication that, lacking such assistance, they would wander helplessly about the countryside like a pack of boobies, but swallowed his annoyance and thanked Quinn tersely for his help—though in fact he proposed to learn where Siverly's estate was from the justiciar, rather than depend on an Irishman who would happily assassinate him were it not for

Fraser's threatening presence.

The guard who admitted them to the castle led them up the curving walkway into the center of the fortress, past a series of arrow slits set into the immense outer wall. These were narrow in their outer aspect but much wider on the inside, to allow an archer to draw a longbow, Grey supposed, and wondered idly if he could fit his head through one.

It was an ancient construction, originally a motte and bailey, and remnants of this were still evident, the central donjon rising like a twelve-sided pepperpot from the old bailey, now a paved courtyard ringed with smaller structures that crowded up against the huge surrounding wall.

The present justiciar was a man named Sir Melchior Williamson, also English, and while neither Grey nor Hal knew him, Harry did, and a note from the brother of the Duke of Pardloe had been enough to secure an invitation to dine at the castle.

"Is it wise to advertise your presence?" Jamie had asked, frowning, when Grey had written the note, enclosing Harry's introduction. "If we need to take Siverly by force, best if no one knows who ye are, surely."

"It's a thought," Grey agreed, folding and stamping the note. "But force should be our last resort. And I want to know whatever the justiciar can tell us about Siverly before I go to see him. Best to know the terrain before a battle." The terrain in this case included Sir Melchior's disposition and potential to be of assistance, should Plan B need to be invoked—but that judgment would have to wait until he saw the man.

Fraser snorted a little but seemed resigned.

"Aye. I'll tell wee Byrd to lay hold of a couple of burlap bags, then."

"What for?"

"To wear over our heads when we break in to Siverly's house."

Grey had stopped in the act of putting his signet back on and eyed Fraser.

"Haven't much faith in my powers of diplomacy, have you?"

"No, and neither has your brother, or I wouldna be here." That stung.

"My brother prefers to have all contingencies covered," Grey said, with exquisite politeness. "And with that in mind ... I'll mention the bags to Tom."

Sir Melchior Williamson proved to be a short, thick-bodied man with the mournful eyes of a bloodhound—these belying a cordial, if wary, nature. He greeted them with pleasure and showed them the facilities of the castle, such as they were.

"Cold as charity," he said, ushering them afterward into the small dining room in his quarters. "And nearly as cramped. Damp as a sieve, too, with the Shannon running past within bow shot of the walls." He sneezed, sniffed, and wiped his nose on his sleeve. "I've had a cold in the head since I came here, two years ago. Going to France day after tomorrow, thank God—though I'm glad you came before I left." So much for Plan B, Grey thought.

The dinner was simple but well cooked, and there was sufficient wine as to allow for comfortable conversation, during which Grey was able to inquire about Major Siverly without making his interest too obvious.

"Glastuig, his place is called," Sir Melchior said, leaning back in his chair and unbuttoning the lower buttons of his waistcoat with an absentmindedness born of long practice. "I've been there just the once, soon after I came. Beautiful house. That was when Mrs. Siverly was in residence, though."

Grey made an encouraging sound.

"She went back to her father's house, when the major went off to Canada. From what I hear, husband and wife never had agreed very well, though, and she declined to come back when he returned."

"The major lives quietly now, does he?" Fraser asked. He'd not taken the lead in conversation but had been useful in leading it back in the desired direction whenever Sir Melchior, who had a tendency to ramble, made off in some unprofitable direction.

"Very quietly. Though I hear he's done the place over lately. Perhaps he proposes to lure his wife back with damask wallpaper." Sir Melchior laughed, the bloodhound wrinkles of his face all turning up.

The conversation moved on to speculation as to what amenities might best please a woman. Sir Melchior was not married but had hopes in that direction; hence his journey to France—though he feared his intended would find the castle less than appealing.

"She's half English, half French," he explained. "Hates Irish food, thinks the Irish even more barbarous than the Scots—meaning no offense, Captain Fraser."

"None taken, sir," Jamie murmured, refilling his glass.

"And I do not know that I can count upon the appeal of my person to overcome such objections." Sir Melchior looked over the rounded slope of his belly and shook his head, resigned.

Conversation became general at that point, and while Grey and Fraser prodded gently from time to time, they learned little more about Gerald Siverly, save for the interesting fact that his father had been a Jacobite.

"Marcus Siverly was one of the Wild Geese," Sir Melchior said. "Know about them, do you?"

Grey did, but shook his head obligingly.

"That's what they called themselves, the Irish brigades who fought for the Stuarts at the end of the last century.

"The castle was rather important then," Sir Melchior explained, beckoning the steward to bring more wine, "because of the river ford. The bridge—you saw the bridge?

Of course you did—it leads into Connaught Province, a Jacobite stronghold in the last war. The last war here, I mean," he added, with a courteous inclination of the head toward Jamie.

"The Williamites assaulted Athlone on the west, the Connaught side, but the Jacobites destroyed the bridge over the Shannon and managed to hold them off. So the Williamites bombarded the town—according to the castle records, more than sixty thousand shots were fired into the town over a ten-day period. They never did take the town, but the Williamite general, a Dutchman named Ginkel, cleverly went downriver a bit—the Shannon's navigable for most of its length—crossed there, and came round behind the Jacobites, flushing them out.

"The Jacobites were crushed at Aughrim then, of course—but the survivors made it to Limerick, and there took ship to Spain. The flight of the Wild Geese, they called it." Sir Melchior took a meditative mouthful of wine and held it for a moment before swallowing; it was good wine.

"So Major Siverly's father left for Spain, did he?" said Grey, taking up his own glass casually. "When did he come back?"

"Oh, he never did. Died in Spain, some years later. The son came back about six years ago, bought Glastuig, which had fallen into disrepair, and began to build it back up. I hear he's come into quite a bit of money lately," Sir Melchior added. "Inheritance from some distant relative, I heard."

"Has he? How fortunate," Grey murmured, and met Jamie's eye across the table.

Jamie gave the shadow of a nod and put his hand into his coat.

"I wonder, sir—as ye seem to know so much regarding the history of these parts—might ye ever have seen a poem such as this?" He handed across a folded copy of the fragment of the Wild Hunt, translated into English.

Sir Melchior looked interested and sat up, fumbling for his spectacles. Placing these on his nose, he read the lines slowly out loud, following the words with a blunt fingertip.

Listen, you men of the three lands. Listen for the sound of the horns that wail in the wind, that come out of the night.

She is coming. The Queen is coming and they come following, her great train, her retinue wild of hair and eye, the volunteers who follow the Queen.

They search out blood, they seek its heat. They echo the voice of the king under the hill.

"Deuced odd thing, that," he said, looking up from the page and blinking owlishly through his spectacles at them. "I've heard of the Wild Hunt but can't say I've ever seen an account quite like this one. Where'd you get it?"

"From a soldier," Jamie said, with perfect truth. "As ye see, it's not complete. I should like to find out the rest of it, and maybe who wrote it." He gave Sir Melchior a look of convincingly scholarly earnestness, quite surprising Grey. He hadn't known Fraser capable of acting. "I have it in mind to publish a wee book one day, with some of the auld tales. This would be a fine addition, if it were complete. Might ye be acquainted with anyone familiar wi' such things?"

"Why ... yes. Yes, I think perhaps I do know someone." Sir Melchior beckoned to his steward to fetch a fresh decanter of port. "Do you know Inchcleraun?"

Both Grey and Fraser shook their heads, but Grey felt his heart pick up its pace a bit.

"It's a Catholic monastery," Sir Melchior said. "A glass with you, Lord John? Yes, yes." He drank deep and set down the glass to be refilled, belching contentedly. "It's on an

island—the island's called Inchcleraun, too—up toward the north end of Lough Ree. Only about ten miles from here by water. The abbot—Michael FitzGibbons, he's called—is quite a collector of old things: parchments, oddments, all-sorts. I met him once; decent sort, for a priest. I think if anyone could tell you where to find the rest of your poem, it might be him."

Grey saw Jamie's face change suddenly. The change was transient, like the ripple of wine in the glass the steward set down before him, but definitely there. Perhaps he took exception to that "decent for a priest" remark? Surely not; such remarks were commonplace, and it hadn't been said with any particular tone of derogation.

"I thank ye," Jamie said, and smiled, nodding over his lifted glass. "A glass with ye, sir? It's a verra nice make of wine, to be sure."



Fireside Tales

Grey had hoped to be rid of Quinn once they reached Athlone, but the Irishman clung like a burr, popping up wherever he and Jamie went in the city, cheerful as a grig, and giving no indication that he viewed John as anything but an esteemed acquaintance.

"Can't you get rid of him?" he'd snapped at Jamie finally, discovering Quinn lounging in the yard of the stable where they'd gone to hire a mule cart for the larger baggage—for Tom had arrived by coach that morning.

"D'ye want me to shoot him?" Fraser inquired. "You've got the pistols, aye?"

"What does he bloody want?" Grey demanded in exasperation, but Fraser merely shrugged and looked stubborn—or, rather, more stubborn than usual, if such a thing were possible.

"He says he has business near Inchcleraun, and I've nay grounds to call him a liar. Have you? Or do ye ken the way, for that matter?"

Grey had given up, having no choice, and suffered Quinn to ride along with them. With Tom and the baggage-cart and with Jamie Fraser's inclination to seasickness in mind, they had determined to go by road up the coast of Lough Ree, then find a boat to ferry Jamie across to Inchcleraun, where he would see the abbot and make inquiries regarding the

Wild Hunt poem, before they made their assault upon Siverly's estate near the village of Ballybonaggin, this being only a few miles from the end of Lough Ree, where the island of Inchcleraun lay.

Quinn had promptly declared that he knew Lough Ree well, would guide them safely and find them transport to Inchcleraun. "For sure, I'm after having my own small bit of business nearby, am I not?"

It was roughly twenty miles from Athlone to the far end of Lough Ree, but a torrential downpour that turned the road to liquid mud, bogged the horses, and sank the cart to its axles marooned them four miles short of their goal.

At this point, Grey was not precisely grateful but at least not displeased that Quinn had come with them, for the Irishman did apparently know the countryside and found them shelter in a tumbledown structure that had once been a cow byre. True, the roof leaked and there was a lingering scent of the building's former inhabitants, but it was substantially drier than the open air, and there was enough dung and a few damp peats to scrape together for a meager fire.

Grey admitted to a reluctant admiration for Quinn's sangfroid. He behaved precisely as though they were all jolly companions, joking and telling stories, and such was his skill that in fact the atmosphere in the dank little shelter was relaxed and pleasant, in spite of what Grey either knew or suspected of the Irishman.

"And what of you, lad?" Quinn was saying to Tom. "D'ye have a tale to tell, to pass the time?"

Tom blushed visibly, despite the darkness.

"I'm no hand with a tale, sir," he said, deprecating. "I, um, could maybe read a bit, though?"

Tom had, for reasons best known to himself, brought along as light recreational reading for the journey a shabby volume borrowed from Hal's library, entitled *The Gentleman* *Instructed*. This was a treatise on deportment, etiquette, and general behavior, dating roughly from the year of Grey's birth, and, while extremely entertaining in spots, was perhaps a trifle obsolete in its advice.

"Oh, by all means, Tom," Grey said. "I'm sure all profit from a bit of elevating discourse."

Tom looked pleased and, after a bit of thumbing, cleared his throat and read:

"Dueling is a Great Evil, which a Christian Gentleman should strive always to avoid. Should appeal to Reason fail to resolve Conflict and Honor prevent gracious Capitulation, a Gentleman should then seek the Assistance of Friends, who by dint of Persuasion may bring your Opponent to a sense of Christian Obligation and Responsibility. However ..."

Someone must have given it to Grey's father—his name was inscribed on the flyleaf—but Grey couldn't imagine his father having actually purchased such a book himself.

Still, Grey reflected, he'd take *The Gentleman Instructed* any day in preference to Tom's usual favorite, *Arbuthnot's Ailments*, from which he was accustomed to regale Grey, in tones of gloomy relish, with descriptions of exactly what happened to persons so reckless as to neglect the proper balance of their humors. Allowing one's phlegm to get the upper hand was particularly dire, he understood, and cleared his throat in reflex at the thought, spitting neatly into the fire, which hissed and sizzled at the insult.

"Should Armed Conflict prove unavoidable, the Gentleman should give his Opponent every Opportunity for Withdrawal without loss of Reputation. To this end, such Epithets as 'Coward,' 'Seducer,' 'Fop,' or most particularly 'Dog' are strongly discouraged to be used."

Grey was beginning to wonder whether perhaps his mother had given the book to his father as a joke. It would be quite like her.

He relaxed against the backstop of his portmanteau and,

with belly pleasantly full and lulled by Tom's reading, fell into a half dream in which he called Siverly out. A duel would be so much more straightforward, he reflected drowsily. "Have at you, sir!" And a straight thrust through the heart ... Well, no, better through the guts; the poltroon didn't deserve a clean, uncomplicated death.

He'd been out a few times, mostly with swords. Inconsequential encounters—both parties drunk, hasty words, perhaps a blow—that neither one could find enough coherence to apologize for while preserving any countenance.

The advantage to dueling while drunk, he'd found, was that there wasn't any sense of fear or urgency about it; it was an elevated sort of feeling, literally—he felt as though he stood a little above himself, living at a faster pace, so that he saw every move, every thrust, as though performed in exquisite slow motion. The grunt of effort, the tickle of sweat, and the smell of his opponent's body were vivid punctuations of their dance, and the sense of being intensely alive was intoxicating in itself.

He always won; it didn't occur to him that he might not. A decent fight, a simple stab, a quick slash that drew a little blood, honor satisfied, and they stood together, chests heaving, often laughing and leaning on each other, still drunk. He hadn't had that sort of duel in years, though.

"Ye've been out now and then yourself, haven't ye, Jamie?"

Distracted by memory, Grey hadn't noticed that Tom had stopped reading, but was pulled from his thoughts by Quinn's interjection. Grey looked up and caught a most peculiar expression on Jamie's face.

"Once or twice," Jamie muttered, averting his eyes. He picked up a stick and poked the fire unnecessarily, making the peats crumble and glow.

"In the Bois de Boulogne, wasn't it? With some

Englishman. I recall hearing about it—a famous fight! And did ye not end in the Bastille for it?" Quinn laughed.

Fraser glanced round with a truly awful look in his eyes, and had Quinn been watching him, he would either have been turned to stone on the spot or leapt up and run for his life.

John himself leapt in, wanting above all to disrupt the conversation.

"I once killed a man by accident during a duel—or thought I had. It was the last duel I fought; I think it might be the last altogether. A most distressing experience."

That duel had been with pistols. He hadn't been drunk then. He'd been suffering the aftereffects of being electrocuted by an electric eel, and the entire experience had been so unreal that he still didn't trust his memories of it. He had no idea how it had begun, still less how it had finished.

His opponent had died, and he regretted that—though not very much, he admitted to himself; Nicholls had been a boor and a waste to society, and, besides, he'd asked for it. Still, his death had been an accident, and Grey really preferred to kill on purpose, when it was necessary.

Interrupted, but not offended, Tom shut the book with his finger in it to hold his place and leaned forward, face wary. That duel had sent him and Lord John to Canada; he hadn't been there when Grey killed Nicholls but certainly remembered the occasion, and it occurred to Grey to wonder whether Tom had chosen the *Gentleman*'s admonition against dueling on purpose.

Quinn's interest had shifted from Fraser to Grey, though, which was what Grey had intended, so he answered when Quinn inquired what he meant by saying he thought he'd killed the man by accident.

"I meant to delope—to fire up into the air?" Quinn nodded impatiently, familiar with the term. "But my man fell and sat bleeding on the grass—he was quite alive, though, and didn't

seem much hurt. The bullet had gone up and more or less fallen on him from a height but hadn't struck him on the head or anything. He walked off, in fact, in the company of a surgeon who happened to be there—it was following a party. I was therefore entirely shocked to hear the next morning that he'd died."

"An accident, sure. But are ye saying that really wasn't the way of it, at all?"

"I am, indeed. It was months later that I received a letter from the surgeon, informing me that the man had had a congenital weakness of the heart—an aneurysm, he called it —that had burst as a result of the shock. It wasn't my shot at all that had killed him—or only indirectly—and Dr. Hunter said that he might have died at any time."

"Dr. Hunter?" Quinn sat up straight and crossed himself. "John Hunter, is it—him they call the Body-Snatcher?"

"Dr. John Hunter, yes," Grey said warily, suddenly on dicey ground. He hadn't meant to mention Hunter by name—and hadn't expected either of the men to know that name, either. Hunter did indeed have a most unsavory reputation, being rapacious in the collection of bodies for dissection. And the question as to just how Dr. Hunter knew of Nicholls's aneurysm ...

"God between us and evil," Quinn said, shuddering visibly. His usual breezy manner had quite vanished. "Think of it! To be taken off and anatomized like a criminal, skinned like an animal and your flesh cut into bloody bits ... God and all angels preserve me from such a fate!"

Grey coughed and, glancing to the side, caught Tom's eye. He hadn't shown Tom Dr. Hunter's letter, but Tom was his valet and knew things. Tom coughed, too, and neatly closed his book.

"It's a nightmare I have sometimes," Quinn confided, rubbing his hands together as though he were cold. "The anatomists have got me, and they've boiled up me bones and

strung me up as a skellington, left hanging there grinning in some medical bugger's surgery for all eternity. Wake from that in a cold sweat, I tell ye truly."

"I shall keep a lookout, Quinn," Jamie said, making a decent attempt at a grin. "Should I see a skeleton wi' a missing eyetooth, I promise I'll buy it and see it given decent burial, just in case."

Quinn reached for his cup and raised it to Jamie.

"It's a bargain, Jamie dear," he said. "And I shall do the same for you, shall I? Though I'm not sure I should be able to tell the difference between your skeleton and that of a gorilla, now."

"And where would ye ever have seen a gorilla, Quinn?" Jamie leaned forward to pour himself another mug of ale.

"In Paris, of course. King Louis's zoo. The King of France is most generous to his subjects," Quinn explained to Tom, who had come to put more fuel on the fire. "On certain days, his collection of outrageous animals is open to the public—and a boggling sight they are, to be sure. Ever seen an ostrich, have ye, lad?"

Grey drew breath, relaxing slightly as the conversation turned safely away from dangerous topics. He wondered briefly about the famous duel in the Bois de Bologne and who the Englishman had been that Fraser fought. That would have been before the Rising; Fraser had mentioned being in Paris then, during a conversation about French novels that they had had at Ardsmuir.

Quite suddenly—and with a yearning that astonished him with its strength—he thought of those rare evenings of friendship, for they had been friends, in spite of their uneasy relationship as prisoner and gaoler; had shared conversation, humor, experience, a commonality of mind that was rare indeed. If he had only had more control, had not made his feelings known ... Well, a good many regrettable things wouldn't have happened, and he had cursed himself on many

occasions since, for his bad judgment. And yet ...

He watched Fraser through his lashes, the glow of the burning peat shining red along the long, straight bridge of the Scotsman's nose and across the broad cheekbones, the light molten bronze in the loose tail of hair pulled back with a leather thong and dripping wet down his back. *And yet* ... he thought.

He had sacrificed their easiness together, and that was a great loss. Fraser, in his turn, had reacted with such revulsion to the revelation of Grey's nature as had led to terrible exchanges between them—and Grey still didn't wish to think about the revelation that had come to him regarding just why—but in the final analysis, he had not lost everything. Fraser knew. And that was in itself a remarkable thing.

There was not easiness between them any longer—but there was honesty. And that was a thing he had had—ever would have—with precious few men.

Quinn was telling some tale now, but Grey paid no great attention.

Tom had been humming under his breath as he went about the business of supper and now escalated to whistling. Absorbed in his own thoughts, Grey hadn't noticed what he was whistling but suddenly caught a phrase that echoed in his head with its words: *Down among the dead men, let him lie!*

He jerked, with a quick, reflexive glance at Fraser. "Down Among the Dead Men" was a popular song, originally from Queen Anne's time, but, in the way of popular songs, with words often adapted to current feeling. The patrons of this afternoon's pub had been singing a blatantly anti-Catholic version, and while Fraser had given little outward sign of offense, Grey was well enough accustomed to his facial expressions—or lack of them—as to have detected the attention to his ale cup that hid the smolder of his eyes.

Surely he would not think Tom's absentminded whistling a

reference to—

"Sure, he'll not be troubled," said Quinn casually. "He doesn't hear music, the creature, only words. Now, when it came time to—"

Grey smiled and pretended courteous attention to the rest of Quinn's tale, but was deaf to its details. He was startled not only by the Irishman's acuity—as to have noticed both his wary glance at Fraser and to have deduced the cause of it—but by the casual revelation that Quinn knew that Fraser was tone-deaf.

Grey himself knew that, though he had momentarily forgotten it. In the time at Ardsmuir when he and Fraser had dined together regularly, Fraser had told him—as the result of a question regarding which was his favorite composer—that in consequence of an ax blow to the head some years before, he had quite lost the ability to distinguish one note from another.

True, Jamie might have mentioned this disability to Quinn in passing sometime during the last two days—but Grey doubted it extremely. Jamie was an extraordinarily private man, and while capable of extreme civility when he wanted to be, his cordiality was often used as a shield to keep his conversant at arm's length.

Grey flattered himself that he knew Fraser better than most people did—and paused for an instant to ask himself whether he was perhaps only discomfited to think that Fraser might have shared this personal bit of information with a stranger. But he dismissed that possibility at once. Which left the logical, if equally discomfiting, conclusion that Quinn had known Fraser before he joined their company. Long before London. With a sudden jolt, he recalled Quinn's remark about ostriches and the King of France's zoo. He, too, had been in France. And by the mathematical principle of equality, if A equaled B ... then B equaled A. Fraser had known Quinn before—intimately. And

had said nothing.



Quagmire

The monastery of Inchcleraun stood on the edge of a small lake, a cluster of small stone buildings surrounding the church. There had once been a surrounding wall and a tall, circular tower, but these had crumbled—or been knocked down—and the stones lay tumbled, half sunk in the soft soil and mottled with lichens and moss.

Despite the signs of past depredation, the monastery was unquestionably inhabited and lively. Jamie had heard the bell from the far side of the lake and now saw the monks coming out of the church, scattering to their labors. There was a fenced pasture behind the buildings, where a small flock of sheep was grazing, and a stone archway showed the ordered rows of a vegetable garden, where two lay brothers hoed weeds in the resigned manner of men who had long since accepted their Sisyphean lot.

One of these directed him to the largest of the stone buildings, where a long-nosed clerk took his particulars, then left him in an anteroom. The atmosphere of the place was peaceful, but Jamie wasn't. Besides the conflict between Grey and Quinn—one more remark from either one, and he was seriously tempted to crack their heads together—there was the looming confrontation with Siverly to be thought about, and the duchess's cryptic warnings about Twelvetrees ... and, somewhere far down underneath the

more pressing concerns, an uneasy awareness that Quinn's Druid cup was presumably here, and he had not quite made up his mind whether to ask about it or not. And if it was here, what then?

Despite these agitations, his first sight of the abbot made him break into a smile. Michael FitzGibbons was a leprechaun. Jamie recognized him at once from Quinn's description of the race.

The man came up perhaps to Jamie's elbow but stood straight as a sawn-off arrow, a stiff white beard bristling pugnaciously from the edges of his jaw and with a pair of green eyes, bright with curiosity.

These eyes had fixed upon Jamie at once, and lit with cordiality when he introduced himself and mentioned his uncle by way of bona fides.

"Alexander's nephew!" Abbot Michael exclaimed, in good English. "Aye, I mind you, boy. I heard a good deal of your adventures, years agone—you and your English wife." He grinned in his beard, displaying small, even white teeth.

"She turned St. Anne's finely upon its ear, from what I heard. Is she with you now, by chance? In Ireland, I mean."

Jamie could tell from the sudden look of awareness and horror on the abbot's face what his own must look like. He felt the abbot's hand on his forearm, amazingly strong for its size.

"No, Father," he heard his own voice say, calm and remote. "I lost her. In the Rising."

The abbot drew a breath of audible pain, clicked his tongue three times, and drew Jamie toward a chair.

"May God rest her soul, poor dear lady. Come, lad, sit. You'll have a tint of whiskey."

This wasn't phrased as an invitation, and Jamie made no argument when a sizable dram was poured and shoved into his hand. He lifted the glass mechanically toward the abbot in acknowledgment, but didn't speak; he was too busy

repeating over and over within himself, *Lord, that she might* be safe! She and the child! as though fearing the abbot's words had indeed sent her to heaven.

The shock of it waned quickly, though, and soon enough the icy ball in his wame began to thaw under the gentle flame of the whiskey. There were immediate things to be dealt with; grief must be put away.

Abbot Michael was talking of neutral things: the weather (unusually good and a blessing for the lambs), the state of the chapel roof (holes so big it looked as though a pig had walked across the roof, and a full-grown pig, too), the day (so fortunate that it was Thursday and not Friday, as there would be meat for dinner, and of course Jamie would be joining them; he would enjoy Brother Bertram's version of a sauce; it had no particular name and was of an indistinct color—purple, the abbot would have called it, but it was well known he had no sense of color and had to ask the sacristan which cope to wear in ordinary time, as he could not tell red from green and took it only on faith that there were such colors in the world, but Brother Daniel—he'd have met Brother Daniel, the clerk outside?—assured him it was so, and surely a man with a face like that would never lie, you had only to look at the size of his nose to know that), and other things to which Jamie could nod or smile or make a noise. And all the time, the green eyes searched his face kind but penetrating.

The abbot saw the moment when Jamie felt once more in command of himself and sat back a little, inviting him by posture more than words to state his business.

"If I might ask a moment of your time, Father ..." He drew the folded sheet of paper out of his bosom and handed it across. "I know ye've a reputation for learning and history, and I ken my uncle said ye've a rare collection of tales of the Auld Ones. I should value your opinion of this bit of verse."

Abbot Michael's brows were thick and white, with long

hairs curling wildly in the manner of old men. These perked up, vibrating with interest, and he bent his attention to the paper, eyes flicking from line to line like a hummingbird in a flower patch.

Jamie's own eyes had been traveling round the room as Abbot Michael talked. It was an interesting place—any place where work was done interested him—and he stood up with a murmured excuse and went to the bookshelves, leaving the abbot to his close inspection of the poem.

The room was as big as the Duke of Pardloe's library and had at least as many books, and yet the feeling of it was more akin to the small cluttered hole in which Pardloe clearly did his thinking.

You could tell from the books whether a library was meant for show or not. Books that were used had an open, interested feel to them, even if closed and neatly lined up on a shelf in strict order with their fellows. You felt as though the book took as much interest in you as you did in it and was willing to help when you reached for it.

The abbot's books were even more overt. A dozen volumes—at least—lay open on the big table by the window, half of them lying on top of one another, all open, and leaves of scribbled notes sticking out of the pile, wavering—beckoning—in the draft from the window.

Jamie felt a strong desire to go across and see what the open books were, to go to the shelves and run his knuckles gently over the leather and wood and buckram of the bindings until a book should speak to him and come willingly into his hand.

It had been a long time since he'd owned a book.

The abbot had read through the sheet several times, with interest, then frowning in concentration, soft lips moving silently over the words. Now he sat back with a small, explosive 'hmmph!' and looked over it at Jamie.

"Well, now, there's a piece of work," he said. "Would you

know who wrote it?"

"I would not, Father. It was given into my hand by an Englishman, but it wasn't him who wrote it. He'd been sent it and wanted me to translate it for him. Which I did but poorly, I'm afraid, me not having the Irish close to my tongue."

"Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm." The abbot's childlike fingers tapped gently on the page, as though he might feel out the truth of the words.

"I've never seen a thing like it," he said at last, sitting back in his little chair. "There are a deal of stories about the Wild Hunt—you'll know that, maybe?"

"I ken 'Tam Lin,' though it's nay a Highland tale. A man from the Lowlands told it, when we were in prison together."

"Aye," the abbot said thoughtfully. "Aye, that's right; it's from the Borders. And this wee sheet doesn't mention anything from Tam Lin's tale—save maybe for this reference to the *teind*. Ye'll know that word, will you?"

Jamie hadn't much noticed the word when doing his own translation, but at the speaking of it felt a prickling of the hairs across his shoulders, like a dog putting up its hackles at a scent.

"A tithe?" he said.

The abbot nodded, tapping his fingers now against his chin as he thought.

"A tithe to hell. Some versions of the tale have it, and some don't. But the notion is that the faeries owe a tithe to hell, for their long lives—and that tithe is one of their number, given over once every seven years."

His lips pursed, pink and clean in the neat frame of his beard.

"But I'll swear this isn't truly old, as you might think. I couldn't be saying, now, without a good bit more thought, what it is exactly about this"—he rubbed his fingers softly over the lines—"that makes me think it was a man of this

century who wrote it, but I do think that."

Father Michael rose abruptly from his desk. "D'you find that you think better on your feet? I do, and a wearisome thing it is in the chapter meetings, the brothers going on at length and me wanting to leap from my seat and dance a jig in the middle of the room to clear my mind but pinned in my chair like that small little fellow there."

He gestured toward a glass case on one of the shelves, in which a gigantic beetle with a huge horny protuberance on its head was pinned to a sheet of thin wood. The sight of its thorny legs and tiny, nasty clawed feet gave Jamie a strong crawling sensation down his back.

"A grand specimen, Father," he said, eyeing it warily.

"Do you like it? 'Twas sent me by a friend from Westphalia, a Jew. A most philosophical sort of Jew," he assured Jamie, "a man of rare parts named Stern. Look, he sent me this, as well."

He plucked a discolored chunk of what looked like ivory out of the clutter on the shelf and put it into Jamie's hand. It proved to be an enormous tooth, long and curving to a blunt point.

"Recognize that, do you?"

"It's the tooth of something verra large that eats flesh, Father," Jamie said, smiling slightly. "But I couldna tell ye is it a lion or a bear, having not had the advantage of bein' bitten by either one. Yet," he added, with a discreet sign against evil. "But as I havena heard that there are lions in Germany ..."

The abbot laughed.

"Most observant, *mo mhic*, a bear is just what it is. A cave bear. You'll have heard of them?"

"I have not," Jamie said obligingly, recognizing that this apparently idle chat was in fact the abbot's means of walking up and down while turning over the question of the poem in his head. Besides, he was in no hurry to return to his

companions. With luck, one of them would have killed the other before he came back, thus simplifying his life. At the moment, he didn't much mind which one survived.

"These would be the massive things, sure. Stern gave me the measurements he'd taken of the thing's skull, and I tell you, man, 'twould be as long as the distance from your elbow to the tip of your longest finger—and I do mean yours, and not mine," he added, twinkling and flexing his wee arm in demonstration.

"All gone now, though, alas," he said, and shook his head regretfully. "There are bears still in the German forests, the creatures, but nothing on the lines of the fellow that bore that tooth. Stern thinks it's some thousands of years old."

"Oh, aye?" Jamie said, not knowing quite what to say to that.

His eye had caught the glint of metal on the shelf, and he squinted, trying to make it out. It was a glass box, with something dark inside, and the gleam of gold within that. But what—

"Oh, you've spotted our hand!" said the abbot, delighted at the chance to show another of his curiosities. "Now, there's a thing!"

He stood on his tiptoes to reach down the box and beckoned Jamie over to the broad table, washed in sunlight from the open window. There was a flowering vine of some kind twining round the window, and the monastery's herb garden was visible outside. The fine spring day washed in on a tide of sweet scent—all of these overpowered when the abbot opened the box.

"Peat?" Jamie said, though there could be no doubt about it. The curled black object—which was indeed a human hand, broken off at the wrist and dried in some way—gave off the same acrid tang as the peat bricks that graced every hearth in Ireland.

The abbot nodded, moving the hand delicately so the ring

wedded to the skin of one bony finger showed more clearly.

"One of the brothers found it in a bog. We didn't know whose it was, but clearly 'twas no peasant. Well, we poked about a bit more and found butter, of course—"

"Butter? In the bog?"

"Beannachtaí m' mhic, everyone puts their butter into the bog in summer to keep cool. Now and then, the woman o' the house forgets just where she put it—or maybe dies, poor creature—and there it sits in its wee bucket. We often find butter when the lay brothers cut peats for the fire. Not often edible," he added, with regret. "But recognizable, even after a great long while. Peat preserves things." He nodded at the hand. "And as I was saying, we went back and prodded and cut a bit, and eventually we found the rest of him."

Jamie had a sudden odd feeling that someone was standing just behind his shoulder, but fought back the urge to turn round.

"He was lying on his back, as though he'd been laid out dead, and he had on rough breeks and a cloak with a small gold brooch to fasten it at the throat. Speaking of throats, someone had cut his for him, and had bashed in his head for good measure." The abbot smiled, though without his usual humor. "And to make quite sure of the thing, there was a thin rope wrapped tight round his neck."

The feeling of someone behind him was so strong that Jamie shifted his position, as though to relieve some stiffness, and took the opportunity for a quick glance. No one there, of course.

"You've not the Irish, you say—so I suppose you'll not know the Aided Diarnmata meic Cerbaill? Or Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca?"

"Ah ... no. Though ... does *aided* mean, perhaps, 'death'?" It was nothing like the *Gàidhlig* word for it, but he thought he'd maybe heard it from Quinn, muttering about Grey.

The abbot nodded, as though this ignorance was

forgivable, if regrettable.

"Aye, it does. Both those poems tell of men who suffered the threefold death—that being a procedure usually reserved for gods or heroes, but, in the case of *Diarnmata* and *Muirchertaig meic Erca*, was imposed for crimes committed against the Church."

Jamie backed a little away from the table and leaned against the wall, folding his arms in what he hoped was a casual manner. The hair still prickled under the clubbed queue at his neck, but he felt somewhat better.

"And ye're thinking that this"—he nodded at the hand—"gentleman had done something o' the sort?"

"I shouldn't think so," the abbot said, "but the sorry fact is, we don't know." He put down the lid of the glass box with gentle fingers and left them resting there.

"We dug quite a bit and harvested three months' worth of peats for our trouble, which was quite enough reward in itself, as I told the brothers who did the work, but we found near the body the gold hilt of a sword—I'm afraid peat does not preserve baser metals at all well—and a cup, inlaid with jewels. And some little distance away—those." He gestured toward the far wall of the study, where two large curving bits of metal gleamed in the shadow.

"What are they?" Jamie was loath to leave the shelter of his wall, but curiosity drove him toward the objects, which upon inspection proved to be a sort of primitive trumpet, though with a curved long stalk and a flattened end rather than a bell.

"A very old woman who lives near the bog told me that they're called *lir*, but I've no notion how she knows, and neither did she. Obviously there was more ceremony than murder about this man's death, though."

The abbot rubbed a knuckle absently across his upper lip.

"Word got about, of course," he said. "And the talk! The folk of the country thought he might be everything from the

High King of the Druids—assuming there ever to have been such a creature—to Fionn MacCumhaill, though why he should be lying in a bog and not having it away with the female denizens of Tír na nÓg, I don't know—to St. Hugelphus."

"St. Hugelphus? Is there a St. Hugelphus?"

The abbot's hand dragged down over his chin and he shook his head, defeated by the perversity of his flock.

"No, but not a whit of good does it do for me to tell them so. They were after building a special chapel and putting the poor fellow's body in it in a glass case, with beeswax candles burning at the head and foot." He glanced at Jamie, one brow lifted. "You say you're newly come to Ireland, so you'll maybe not know how it is with the Catholics here, since the penal laws."

"I could maybe guess," Jamie said, and the abbot smiled in wry response.

"Maybe you could, at that. Leave it that the monastery once owned as much land as a man could walk over in half a day. Now we've the buildings left, barely the ground to grow a few heads of cabbage, and lucky to have it. As to dealings with the government and the Protestant landowners, especially the Anglo–Irish settlers ..." His lips tightened. "The very last thing I need is to have flocks of pilgrims making their way here to venerate a false saint covered in gold."

"How did ye stop it?"

"We put the poor fellow back in the bog," the abbot said frankly. "I doubt he was a Christian, but I said a proper Mass for him, and we buried him with the words. I let it be known that I'd taken his jewels off and sent them to Dublin—I did send the brooch and the sword hilt—to discourage anyone looking to dig him up again. We mustn't put folk in the way of temptation, now, must we? D'you want to see the cup?"

Jamie's heart gave an unexpected thump, but he nodded,

keeping an expression of mild interest on his face.

The abbot stretched up on his tiptoes to reach down a bunch of keys that hung from a hook by the door and beckoned Jamie to come along.

Outside in the cloister walk, the day was fine, and fat bees buzzed over the herb garden that lay within the square of the cloister, dusted thick with the yellow pollen. The air was mild, but Jamie could not get rid of the sense of chill that had struck him at sight of that clawed black hand with its gold ring.

"Father," he blurted, "why did you keep his hand?"

The abbot had reached a carved wooden door and was groping through his ring of keys, but looked up at that.

"The ring," he said. "There are runes upon it, and I think them maybe done in the old Ogham way of writing. I didn't like to take the thing off, for it's plain to see that you couldn't do it without pulling the finger to pieces. So I kept the hand, in order to make a drawing of the ring and its markings, meaning to send it to a fellow I know who claims to have some notion of Ogham. I was meaning to bury the hand with the rest of the body—and still am," he added, finding the key he wanted. "I just haven't found the time to do it. Here, now—" The door swung open, silent on leather hinges, revealing a set of steps, and a smell of onions and potatoes floated up from the depths of a dark cellar.

For an instant, Jamie wondered why one would lock a root cellar but then realized that, with the famine Quinn had spoken of still green in the memory of Ireland, food might be the most valuable thing the monastery had.

There was a lantern and a tinderbox standing on the top step; Jamie lighted the lantern for the abbot, then followed him down, privately amused at the abbot's practicality in finding a hiding place for a valuable thing, shoved casually behind a row of last winter's apples wizened by now into wrinkled things the size of a cow's eyeball. It was valuable, too; a glance was enough to show him that. The cup was about the size of a small quaich and fit in the palm of his hand when Abbot gave it to him.

It was made of a polished wood, to his surprise, rather than gold. Stained and darkened by immersion in the peat, but still beautifully made. There was a carving in the bottom of the bowl, and gemstones—uncut, but polished—were set round the rim, each one sunk into a small carved depression and apparently fastened there with some sort of resin.

The cup gave him the same feeling he'd had in the abbot's study: the sense that someone—or something—was standing close behind him. He didn't like it at all, and the abbot saw that.

"What is it, *mo mhic*?" he asked quietly. "Does this speak to you?"

"Aye, it does," he said, trying for a smile. "And I think it's saying, 'Put me back.' " He handed the cup to the abbot, repressing a strong urge to wipe his hand on his breeks.

"Is it an evil thing, do you think?"

"I canna say that, Father. Only that it gives me the cold grue to touch it. But"—he clasped his hands behind his back and leaned forward—"what is the thing carved into the bottom there?"

"A carraig mór, or so I think. A long stone." The abbot turned the bowl, holding it sideways so that the lantern light illumined the dish. The cold grue slid right down the backs of Jamie's legs, and he shuddered. The carving showed what was plainly a standing stone—cleft down the center.

"Father," he said abruptly, making up his mind on the moment. "I've a thing or two to tell ye. Might ye hear my confession?"



They stopped briefly for Father Michael to fetch his stola,

then walked out across the sheep field and into a small apple orchard, thick with scent and the humming of bees. There they found a couple of stones to sit upon, and he told the abbot, as simply as he could, about Quinn, the notion of a fresh Jacobite rising from Ireland, and the idea of using the Druid king's *Cupán* to legitimize the Stuarts' last bid for the throne of three kingdoms.

The abbot sat clutching the ends of the purple stola that hung round his neck, head down, listening. He didn't move or make any response while Jamie laid out for him Quinn's plan. When Jamie had finished, though, Father Michael looked up at him.

"Did you come to steal the cup for this purpose yourself?" the abbot asked, quite casually.

"No!" He spoke from astonishment rather than resentment; the abbot saw it and smiled faintly.

"No, of course not." He was sitting on a rock, the cup itself perched on his knee. He looked down at it, contemplating. "Put it back, you said."

"It's no my place to say, Father. But I—" The presence that had hovered near him earlier had vanished, but the memory of it was cold in his mind. "It—he—he wants it back, Father," he blurted. "The man ye found in the bog."

The abbot's green eyes went wide, and he studied Jamie closely. "He spoke to you, did he?"

"Not in words, no. I—I feel him. Felt him. He's gone now."

The abbot picked up the cup and peered into it, his thumb stroking the ancient wood. Then he put it down on his knee and, looking at Jamie, said quietly, "There's more, is there not? Tell me."

Jamie hesitated. Grey's business was not his to share—and it had nothing to do with the bog-man, the cup, nor anything that was the abbot's concern. But the priest's green eyes were on him, kind but firm.

"It's under the seal, you know, mo mhic," he said,

conversationally. "And I can see you've a burden on your soul."

Jamie closed his eyes, the breath going out of him in a long, long sigh.

"I have, Father," he said. He got up from the stone where he'd sat and knelt down at the abbot's feet.

"It's not a sin, Father," he said. "Or most of it's not. But it troubles me."

"Tell God, and let him ease you, man," the abbot said, and, taking Jamie's hands, placed them on his bony knees and laid his own hand gently on Jamie's head.

He told it all. Slowly, with many hesitations. Then faster, the words beginning to find themselves. What the Greys wanted of him, and how they had made him come to Ireland. How it was, caught between the loyalty of his old friendship to Quinn and his present forced obligation to John Grey. Swallowing, face burning and hands tight on the black cloth of the abbot's habit, he told about Grey's feeling for him and what had passed between them in the stable at Helwater. And finally—with the feeling of jumping from a high cliff into a roaring sea—he told about Willie. And Geneva.

There were tears running down his face before he had finished. When Jamie had come to the end of it, the abbot drew his hand softly down Jamie's cheek before dipping his hand into his robe and coming out with a large, worn, mostly clean black handkerchief, which he handed him.

"Sit, man," he said. "Bide for a bit, and rest while I think."

Jamie got up and sat on the flat stone again, blowing his nose and wiping his face. He felt emptied of turmoil, purged. And more at peace than he'd been since the days before Culloden.

His mind was blank, and he made no effort to inscribe anything on it. He breathed freely, no tightness in his chest. That was enough. There was more, though: the spring sun came out from behind the clouds and warmed him, a bee lighted briefly on his sleeve, spilling grains of yellow pollen when it rose, and the bruised grass where he'd knelt smelled of rest and comfort.

He had no idea how long he'd sat in this pleasant state of exhausted mindlessness. But Father Michael stirred at last, stretched his old back with a muffled groan, and smiled at him.

"Well, now," he said. "Let's begin with the easy bits. You're not in the habit of fornicating regularly with young women, I hope? Good. Don't start. If you feel you—no." He shook his head. "No. I was going to recommend that you find a good girl and marry her, but I saw how it is with you; your wife's still with you." He spoke in an entirely matter-of-fact tone of voice.

"It wouldn't be fair on a young woman, were you to marry while that's the case. At the same time, you mustn't cling over-long to the memory of your wife; she's safe with God now, and you must deal with your life. Soon ... but you'll know when it's right. Meanwhile, avoid the occasion of sin, aye?"

"Aye, Father," Jamie said obediently, thinking briefly of Betty. He'd avoided her so far, and certainly meant to keep doing so.

"Cold baths help. That and reading. Now, your son ..." These words were equally matter-of-fact but gave Jamie a breathless feeling, a small bubble of happiness beneath his ribs—one that popped with the abbot's next words.

"You must do nothing to endanger him." The abbot looked at him seriously. "You've no claim on him, and from what you say, he's well settled. Might it not be better—for the both of you—for you to leave this place where he is?"

"I—" Jamie began, hardly knowing where to begin for the rush of words and feelings that flooded his brain, but the abbot raised a hand.

"Aye, I know you said you're a paroled prisoner—but from

what you say regarding the service these English require of you, I think there is an excellent chance that you might win your freedom as a result."

Jamie thought so, too, and the thought filled him with a violent confusion. To be free was one thing—to leave his son was another. Two months ago, he might have been able to leave, knowing William well looked after. Not now.

He forced down the sense of violent refusal the abbot's words had roused in him.

"Father—I hear what ye say. But ... the boy has no father, no man to ... to show him the way of being a man. His grandfather's a worthy gentleman, but very old, and the man who was legally his father is ... is dead." He drew a deep breath; need he confess that he had killed the old earl? No. He'd done it to save William's life, and that could be no sin. "If I thought for an instant that my presence there was danger to him, rather than benefit—I would go at once. But I do not think I delude myself in thinking that ... he needs me."

The last words came hoarsely, and the abbot regarded him closely for a moment, before nodding.

"You must pray for the strength to do the right thing—God will give it to you."

He nodded mutely. He'd prayed for strength like that twice before, and it had been granted. He hadn't thought he'd survive, either time, but he had. He hoped if it came to a third time, he wouldn't.

"I thought ye said this was the easy bits," Jamie said, forcing a smile.

The abbot grimaced, not without sympathy.

"Easy to see what's to do, I meant. Not necessarily easy to do it." He stood up and brushed a fuzzy catkin from the shoulder of his robe. "Come, let's be walking a bit. A man could turn to stone sitting too long."

They paced slowly through the orchard and out into a

stretch of fields, some left in meadow for a few sheep and the odd cow, some sowed and already sprouting, a green haze covering the furrows. They kept to the edges, not to trample the young neeps and tattie-vines, and eventually emerged on the edge of a bog.

This was a proper bog, not merely the soggy clay or spongy footing common everywhere in Ireland. A treeless gray-green bumpy landscape, it stretched a good half mile before them to a tiny hillock of rock in the far distance, from which a stunted pine tree sprouted, flaglike in the wind. For once out of the shelter of the trees, the wind had come up and sang about their ears, flapping the ends of Father Michael's stola and tugging at the skirts of their clothing.

Father Michael beckoned to him, and, following, he found a wooden trackway, half sunk between the hummocks of moss-choked grass that rose up among a thousand tiny channels and pools.

"I don't know who made these tracks to begin with," the abbot remarked, setting a sandaled foot on the thin planks. "They've been here longer than any man remembers. We keep them up, though; it's the only safe way across the moss."

Jamie nodded; the planks gave slightly when stepped upon, water oozing through the cracks between. But they bore his weight, though the vibration of his step made the bog beside the trackway tremble, the antennae of moss quivering in curiosity as he passed.

"The Old Ones thought the number three holy, just as we do." Father Michael's words, half-shouted above the wind, drifted back to him. "They had the three gods—the god of thunder, him they called Taranis. Then Esus, the god of the underworld—mind, they didn't see the underworld quite the same way we think of hell, but it wasn't a pleasant place, nonetheless."

"And the third?" Jamie was still clutching the abbot's

handkerchief. He wiped his nose with it; the chill wind made it stream.

"Ah, now, that would be ..." The abbot didn't stop walking but tapped his fingers briskly on his skull, to assist thought. "Now, who in creation ... Oh, of course. The third is the god of the particular tribe, so they'd all have different names."

"Oh, aye." Was the abbot telling him this only to pass the time? He wondered. Obviously they weren't out walking for their health, and he knew of only one reason they might be traversing a bog.

He was right.

"Now, a proper god requires sacrifice, does he not? And the old gods wanted blood."

He'd drawn close to the abbot now and could hear him clearly, despite the whine of the wind. There were birds in the moss, too; he heard the call of a snipe, thin and high.

"They would take prisoners of war and burn them in great wicker cages, for Taranis." The abbot turned his head to look back at Jamie, showing a smile. "A good thing for you the English are more civilized now?" The ironic question at the end of this remark was evidently meant to convey the abbot's doubt regarding the level of English civilization, and Jamie gave him back a wry smile, acknowledging it. Being burned alive ... well, they'd done that, too, the English. Fired crofts and fields, without regard to the women and children they condemned—either by the fire itself, or by cold and slow starvation.

"I'm fortunate, to be sure, Father."

"They do still hang men—the English," the abbot said thoughtfully. It wasn't a question, but Jamie gave an obliging grunt.

"That was the means of dispatch preferred by Esus—hanging or stabbing. Sometimes both!"

"Well, the hanging doesna always answer," Jamie replied, a little tersely. "Sometimes a man will live, in spite of it. Which," he added, in hopes of leading the abbot on to the point he seemed to be tending toward, "is why whoever did in your bog-man wrapped the rope around his neck instead. Though I should have thought the bashing and throat-cutting and drowning—assuming he had any breath left to drown with—would have made it certain enough in any case."

The abbot nodded, unperturbed. The wind was pulling wisps of his white hair loose and causing them to wave about his tonsure, much like the wisps of bog-cotton that grew near the track.

"Teutates," he said triumphantly. "That's the name of one of the old tribal gods, at least. Aye, he took his victims into his embrace in the water—drowning in sacred wells and the like. This way." He had come to a spot where the trackway forked, half of it going off toward the little hillock, the other toward a gaping hole in the bog. That would be where the monks were in the habit of cutting their peats, Jamie supposed—and where they'd found the bog-man, whose grave they were almost certainly heading for.

Why? he wondered uneasily. The abbot's conversation had implied that this wee expedition had something to do with Jamie's confession—and, whatever it was, it wasn't meant to be easy.

But he hadn't yet been absolved of his sins. And so he followed, as the abbot turned toward the hill.

"I didn't think I should put him straight back where he came from," Father Michael explained, flattening the flying wisps of hair with his palm. "Someone cutting peats would just be digging him up again, and the whole wearisome business to do again."

"So ye put him under the hill," Jamie said, and a sudden chill went up his back at the phrase. That was in the poem "The King from Under the Hill"—and, to his knowledge, the folk "under the hill" were the Auld Ones, the faerie folk. His mouth was dry from the wind, and he had to swallow before speaking further. Before he could ask his question, though, the abbot bent to take off his sandals and, hiking up the skirts of his robe, skipped on ahead.

"This way," he called back over his shoulder. "We'll need to wade the last little bit!"

Muttering—but carefully avoiding blasphemy—Jamie stripped off shoes and stockings and followed the abbot's footsteps carefully. He was twice the abbot's size; there was no chance the priest would be able to pull him free, should he strike a shaking quagmire and sink.

The dark water purled up between his toes, cold but not unpleasant on his bare feet. He could feel the springy peat beneath it, spongy, slightly prickling. He sank ankle-deep at each step, but no further, and came ashore on the little hillock with no more damage than a few splashes to his breeks.

"Well, then," Father Michael said, turning to him. "The difficult part."



Father Michael led him to the top of the little hillock, and there beneath the pine tree was a crude seat, carved out of the native stone. It was blotched with blue and green and yellow lichens and had plainly stood there for centuries.

"This is the High Seat—the *árd chnoc*—where the kings of this place were confirmed before the old gods," the priest said, and crossed himself. Jamie did likewise, impressed despite himself. It was a very old place, and the stone seemed to hold a deep silence; even the wind over the bog had died, and he could hear his heart beating in his chest, slow and steady.

Father Michael reached into the leather pouch he wore at his belt and, to Jamie's disquiet, drew out the gem-studded wooden cup, which he placed gently on the ancient seat. "I know what you once were," he said to Jamie, in a conversational tone of voice. "Your uncle Alex would write to me with news of you, during the Rising. You were a great warrior for the king. The rightful king."

"That was a long time ago, Father." He was beginning to have an uneasy feeling, and not only because of the cup, though the sight of it was making the hair prickle on his neck again.

The abbot straightened up and eyed him appraisingly.

"You're in the prime of your manhood, *Shéamais Mac Bhrian*," he said. "Is it right that you should waste the strength and the gift you have for leading men?" *Jesus God, he wants me to do it,* Jamie thought, appalled. *Take that cursed thing and do as Quinn wants*.

"Is it right for me to lead men to their deaths, for the sake of a vain cause?" he asked, sharply enough that the abbot blinked.

"Vain? The cause of the Church, of God? To restore the anointed king and remove the foot of the English from the neck of your people and mine?"

"Vain, Father," he said, striving for calmness, though the mere thought of the Rising in Scotland tightened every muscle he had. "Ye know what I was, ye say. But ye dinna ken what I saw, what happened there. Ye havena seen what happened after, when the clans were crushed—crushed, Father! When they—" He stopped abruptly and closed his eyes, mouth pressed tight shut 'til he should recover himself.

"I hid," Jamie said, after a moment. "On my own land. Hid in a cave for seven years, for fear of the English." He took a deep breath and felt the scars tight on his back, burning. He opened his eyes and fixed the priest's gaze with his own.

"I came down one night to hunt, perhaps a year past the time of Culloden. I passed a burnt-out croft, one I'd passed a hundred times. But rain had washed out the path and I stepped aside—and I stepped on her." He swallowed, remembering the heart-stopping snap of the bone under his foot. The terrible delicacy of the tiny ribs, the sprinkle of bones that had once been hands, strewn careless as pebbles.

"A wee lass. She'd been there months.... The foxes and corbies ... I didna ken which one she was. There were three of them lived there, three wee lassies, near in age, and their hair brown—it was all that was left of her, her hair—so I couldna say was she Mairi or Beathag or wee Cairistiona—I —" He stopped speaking, abruptly.

"I said it would be difficult." The priest spoke quietly, not looking away. His eyes were dark, the brightness of them shadowed but steady. "Do you think I've not seen such things here?"

"Do ye want to see them again?" His hands had curled into fists without his knowledge.

"Will they stop?" the priest snapped. "Will ye condemn your countrymen and mine to such cruelties, to the rule of the yellow-johns, for lack of will? I'd not thought from Alexander's letters that ye lacked courage, but perhaps he was wrong in what he thought of you."

"Oh, no, Father," he said, and his voice dropped low in his throat. "Dinna be trying that one on me. Aye, I ken what it is to lead men, and how it's done. I'll not be led."

Father Michael gave a brief snort, half amused, but his eyes stayed dark.

"Is it the boy?" he asked. "You'd turn aside from your duty—from the thing God has called you to do!—to be a lickspittle to the English, to wear their chains, to go and tend a child who does not need you, who will never bear your name?"

"No," Jamie said between his teeth. "I have left home and family before, for the sake of duty. I lost my wife to it. And I saw what that duty led to. Mind me, Father—if it comes to war, it will not be different this time. It. Will. Not. Be. Different!"

"Not if men like you will not chance it! Mind what I say there are sins of omission, as well as those of commission. And remember the parable of the talents, will you now. Do you mean to stand before God, come the Last Day, and tell Him you spurned the gifts He gave you?"

It came to Jamie quite suddenly that Father Michael knew. Knew what, or how much, Jamie couldn't say—but the news of Quinn's machinations perhaps fitted in with other things Father Michael knew, of the Irish Jacobites. This was not the first inkling he'd had of what was afoot, Jamie would swear to it.

He gathered himself, pushing down his temper. The man was doing his own duty—as he saw it.

"Is there a lang stone like that one somewhere nearby?" he asked, lifting his chin toward the cup. The cleft stone carved into its bowl wasn't visible from where he stood, but there was a feeling on the back of his neck like a cool wind blowing—and the boughs of the little pine tree were still.

Father Michael was disconcerted by this sudden change of subject.

"I—why ... Aye, there is." He turned his head toward the west, where the sun was slowly sinking behind a scrim of cloud, red as a fresh-fired cannonball, and pointed beyond the edge of the bog. "A mile or so that way. There's a wee circle of stones, standing in a field. One of them is cleft like that." He turned back, looking curiously at Jamie. "Why?"

Why, indeed. Jamie's mouth was dry and he swallowed, but without much effect. Must he tell the priest exactly why he was certain that this effort to restore the Stuarts would not succeed, any more than the Rising in Scotland had?

No, he decided. He wouldn't. Claire was his, alone. There was nothing sinful in his love for her, nothing that concerned Father Michael, and he meant to keep her to himself.

Beyond that, he thought wryly, if I told him, he'd be convinced I'd lost my wits—or was trying to feign madness to

wriggle out of this foolish coil.

"Why did ye bring that here?" he asked, ignoring the priest's question and nodding at the cup.

Father Michael looked at him for a time without answering, then lifted one shoulder.

"If you should be the man that God has chosen for the task, then I meant to give it to you, to use as you thought best. If you are not ..." He squared his shoulders under the black broadcloth of his habit. "Then I shall give it back to its original owner."

"I am not, Father," Jamie said. "I canna touch the thing. Perhaps it's a sign that I am not the man."

The look of curiosity returned. "Do you ... feel his presence? The bog-man? Now?"

"I do." He did, too; the sense of someone standing behind him was back and had about it something of ... eagerness? Desperation? He could not say what it was exactly, but it was bloody unsettling.

Was the dead man one like Claire? Was that the meaning of the carving in the bowl? If so, what fate had come upon him, to leave him here, in this place of desolation, far from wherever he had come?

Doubt seized him suddenly in jaws of iron. What if she had not made it back through the stones, back to safety? What if she, like the man who lay beneath the black waters here, had gone astray? Horror clenched his fists so tightly that the nails cut into his palms, and he kept them so, clung to the realness of the physical pain with stubborn force, so that he might dismiss the much more painful thought as something unreal, insubstantial.

Lord, that she might be safe! he prayed in agony. She and the child!

"Absolve me, Father," he whispered. "I would go now."

The abbot's lips pressed tight, reluctant, and the hair trigger of Jamie's temper went off.

"Do you think to blackmail me by withholding absolution? Ye blackguard priest! You would betray your vows and your office for the sake of—"

Father Michael stopped him with an upraised hand. He glared at Jamie for a moment, unmoving, then traced the sign of the cross in the air, in sharp, precise movements.

"Ego te absolvo, in nomine Patris—"

"I'm sorry, Father," Jamie blurted. "I shouldna have spoken to ye like that. I—"

"We'll count that as part of your confession, shall we?" murmured Father Michael. "Say the rosary every day for a month; there's your penance." The shadow of a wry smile crossed his face, and he finished, "et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti, Amen." He lowered his hand and spoke normally.

"I didn't think to ask how long it had been since your last confession. D'you remember how the Act of Contrition goes, or had I best help you?" It was said seriously, but Jamie saw the trace of the leprechaun lurking in those bright green eyes. Father Michael folded his hands and bowed his head, as much to hide a smile as for piety.

"Mon Dieu, je regrette ..." He said it in French, as he always had. And as it always had, a sense of peace came upon him with the saying.

He stopped speaking, and the air of the evening was still.

For the first time, he saw what he had not seen before: the mound of slightly darker rock and soil, speckled with the sprouting green blades of fresh grass, spangled with the tiny jewels of wildflowers. And a small wooden cross at the head of it, just under the pine tree.

Dust to dust. This was the stranger's grave, then; they had given him burial in the Christian way, letting the unseemly jumble of bones and leather, so long preserved in dark water, crumble at last in peaceful anonymity. Here, by the seat of kings.

The sun was still above the horizon, but the light came

low, and shadows lay dark upon the bog, ready to rise and join the coming night.

"Wait for a bit, *mo mhic*," Father Michael said, reaching to retrieve the cup. "Let me put this away safe, and I'll see ye back."

In the distance, Jamie could see the dark gash of the pit where the peat-cutters had been at work. They called that sort of place a moss-hag in Scotland, he thought, and wondered briefly what—or who?—might lie in other bogs.

"Dinna fash yourself, Father," he said, looking out across the tumps and hummocks, the shallow pools glinting in the last of the sun. "I'll find my own way."



Stalking Horse

Quinn had gone, presumably to tend to his own business. Jamie found his absence soothing but not reassuring; Quinn hadn't gone far. Jamie told Grey what the abbot had said regarding the Wild Hunt poem, and after some discussion it was decided that Jamie should make the first approach to Siverly.

"Show him the Wild Hunt poem," Grey had suggested. "I want to know if he seems to recognize it. If not, there's at least the possibility that it has nothing to do with him and was somehow included with Carruthers's packet by mistake. If he *does* recognize it, though, I want to know what he says about it." He'd smiled at Jamie, eyes alight with the imminence of action. "And once you've spied out the land for me, I'll have a better notion of which tack to take when I see him."

A stalking horse, Jamie noted dourly. At least Grey had been honest about that.

On Tom Byrd's advice, Jamie wore the brown worsted suit, as being more suitable to a day call in the country—the puce velvet was much too fine for such an occasion. There had been an argument between Tom and Lord John as to whether the yellow silk waistcoat with the blackwork was preferable to the plain cream-colored one, as indicating Jamie's presumed wealth, or not, as possibly being thought

vulgar.

"I dinna mind if he thinks I'm common," Jamie assured Tom. "It will put him at his ease if he feels himself my superior. And the one thing we know of him for sure is that he likes money; so much the better if he thinks me a rich vulgarian."

Lord John made a noise that he hastily converted to a sneeze, causing both Jamie and Tom to look at him austerely.

Jamie was not sure how much—if at all—Siverly might recall him. He had seen Siverly only now and then in Paris, and only for a few weeks. He thought they might have exchanged words once in the course of a dinner, but that was the extent of their interaction. Still ... Jamie recalled Siverly; it was not unthinkable that the man would remember him, particularly given Jamie's noticeable appearance.

In Paris, he had worked in his cousin Jared's wine business; he might reasonably have continued in trade, after the Rising. There would be no reason for Siverly either to have heard of his actions, nor to have followed his movements after Culloden.

Jamie hadn't bothered noting that his English speech would likely cause Siverly to regard him as a social inferior, no matter what he wore, and thus when he gave his horse to the gatekeeper who came out of the lodge to meet him, he broadened his accent slightly.

"What's the name of this place, lad?"

"Glastuig," the man said. "Will it be the place ye're lookin' for, then?"

"The verra place. Will your master be at home the day?"

"Himself's in the house," the gatekeeper said dubiously. "As for bein' at home ... I'll send and see, if ye like, sir."

"Much obliged to ye, lad. Here, then, give him this—and that wee bawbee's for yourself." He handed over the note he'd prepared, enclosing the introduction from Sir Melchior

and asking for an interview, along with a lavish thrupenny bit.

His role as a rich vulgarian thus promisingly begun, he furthered it by openly gaping at the imposing house and its extensive grounds as he walked slowly up the drive after the servant. It was an old house—he hadn't yet seen a newly built one in Ireland—but well kept up, its dark stonework freshly pointed and the chimneys—fourteen, he counted them—all alight and drawing well. Six good horses in the far pasture, including one that he wouldn't have minded seeing closer to—a big dark bay with a white blaze and a nice arse end; good muscle, he thought approvingly. A good-sized lawn spread out before the house, a gardener pushing a heavy roller over it with no perceptible enthusiasm, and the gardens themselves had a dull, prosperous gleam to their leaves, wet with the drizzling rain.

He was in no great doubt that he'd be admitted, and by the time he'd reached the door, there was a butler standing in it to take his hat and cloak and show him to a drawing room. Like the house itself, it was richly appointed—there was a huge silver candlestick, with six beeswax tapers shedding a gracious light—but lacking any great sense of style. He wandered slowly around the room, fingering the ornaments: a Meissen figurine of a woman, a dove perched on her hand, taking a comfit from her lips; a longcase clock with three dials, showing the time, the barometric pressure, and the phase of the moon; a tobacco humidor made of a dark, unfamiliar kind of wood that he thought might be African; a footed silver bowl full of sugared violets, jumbled and broken among a handful of ginger-nut biscuits; a viciouslooking club with a peculiar knob at the end; a curious piece of something ... He picked it up to examine closer. It was a rectangular strip, perhaps ten inches by five (he measured it automatically, using the joints of his left middle finger as gauge), made of small, odd beads—what were they made of?

Not glass ... Shell?—strung on a woven thread in an interesting pattern of blue and white and black.

Surely no woman had assembled these things. He wondered just what the owner of such a magpie collection would be like. For all their delving into the man's antecedents, the Greys had given Jamie no coherent picture of Siverly's personality. Carruthers had painted a vivid portrait of the man—but his record was concerned only with the man's crimes and did little to reveal the man himself.

"A man may smile, and smile, and be a villain," he thought to himself. He had himself met personable villains. And amiable fools whose actions did more damage than deliberately wicked men. His mouth set at the memory of Charles Edward Stuart. He had no doubt that this Siverly was a villain—but what kind of villain?

A heavy, limping step came down the hall, and Major Siverly came in. He was still an imposing man, nearly as tall as Jamie himself, though a good deal older now and going to paunch. His face was slab-sided, the skin faintly gray, as though he'd been cut from the same rock as his house, and while he had adopted an expression of welcome, this was unable to conceal the clear lines of harshness and open cruelty in his face.

Jamie offered his hand and a cordial greeting, thinking to himself that any soldier unlucky enough to draw Siverly as a commander would have known at once what he was in for. "Failure to suppress a mutiny" was one of the charges against him.

"Your servant, sir," Siverly said politely, offering his hand in return. He looked Jamie over with a practiced glance—nay *a fool, no*, Jamie thought, as he made his own courtesies—but if he recalled Jamie, there was no hint of it in his manner.

"So Melchior Williamson says that you've something in which I might have an interest," Siverly said abruptly. No offer of refreshment, nor even a seat, Jamie noted. Evidently he was not sufficiently interesting in himself as to merit much of the man's time.

"Aye, sir, I have," he answered, reaching into his bosom for the copy of the Wild Hunt poem he'd brought. "Sir Melchior said that you'd some expertise in matters of antiquity—as I see ye have." He nodded at the silver bowl, which he knew from its hallmark to have been made no more than fifty years prior and could plainly see was the work of a mediocre silversmith. Siverly's lip twitched, not quite curling, and he took the paper from Jamie, jerking his head at the settee in what was not quite an invitation to sit down.

Jamie sat, nonetheless. Siverly glanced briefly at the paper, clearly not expecting anything of interest—and then stiffened, looked at Jamie with a brief, piercing glare, then returned to the sheet. He read it through twice, turned the paper over to examine the back, then set it down carefully on the mantelpiece.

He walked over and stood in front of Jamie, looking down. Jamie gave him a bland look, keeping his feet under him in case the man went for his throat—from the look of him, it was in his mind.

"Who the bloody hell are you?" Siverly demanded. His voice was pitched low and was meant to sound dangerous.

Jamie smiled up at him. "Who do ye think I am?" he asked softly.

That gave Siverly pause. He stood looking at Jamie, his eyes narrowed, for quite a long time.

"Who gave you that paper?"

"A friend," Jamie replied, with complete truth. "His name is not mine to share." *Can I go further?* "*Is deonach é*." He is a volunteer.

That stopped Siverly as surely as if he had received a bullet in the heart. Very slowly, he lowered himself to a chair opposite, not taking his eyes from Jamie's face. Did a flicker of recognition stir in those eyes, or only at last suspicion?

Jamie's heart was beating fast and he felt the prickle of excitement down his forearms.

"No," Siverly said at last, and his voice had changed. It was casual now, dismissive. "I've no idea how your friend came by that paper, but it doesn't matter. The subject of the poem is ancient, to be sure. But the verse itself is no more ancient than you yourself are, Mr. Fraser. Anyone who's read Irish verse in a scholarly way could tell you that." He smiled, an expression that didn't reach his deep-set eyes, the color of rainwater on slate.

"What is your interest in such a thing, Mr. Fraser?" he asked, becoming overtly cordial. "If you are in the way to collect antiquities and curios, I should be pleased to give you an introduction to one or two dealers in Dublin."

"I should be most obliged to ye, sir," Jamie said pleasantly. "I did think of going to Dublin; I ken a man at the great university there to whom I thought of showing this. Perhaps your dealers might have an interest in it, too."

A spark of alarm flickered in the deep-set eyes. At what? Jamie wondered, but the answer came immediately. He doesna want a great many people to see it—lest the wrong person hear about it. And who might that be, I wonder?

"Really," Siverly said, pretending doubt. "What is the name of your university man? Perhaps I know him."

Jamie's mind went blank for an instant. He fumbled among the names of his Irish acquaintance for anyone he'd known who might conceivably be or have been at Trinity—but then caught sight of the tenseness of Siverly's shoulders. The man was trying it on as much as he was.

"O'Hanlon," he said carelessly, choosing a name at random. "Peter O'Hanlon. D've ken him?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"Well, nay matter. I'll thank ye for your time, sir." Jamie leaned forward, preparatory to rising. He'd accomplished what he came for. He'd learned that the Irish poem was connected to Siverly and had some secret meaning—and he'd successfully fixed Siverly's attention on him as a person of interest, that was certain. The man was looking at him like a wolf with a prey in view.

"Where are you staying, Mr. Fraser?" he asked. "Perhaps I might discover some further information that would be helpful to you. If, that is, you are still interested in learning more regarding your verse?"

"Oh, aye, sir, that I am. I'm in the village, at Beckett's public house. Much obliged to ye, sir."

He stood and bowed to Siverly, then crossed the room to take the paper from the mantelpiece. He heard Siverly rise behind him, saying, "Not at all, Mr. Fraser."

The reflexes bred from a lifetime of people trying to kill him saved him. Jamie heard the man's sharp intake of breath and dodged aside, as the knob of the club slashed through the spot where his head had been and crashed down on the wooden mantel, making splinters fly.

Siverly was between him and the door. Jamie lowered his head and charged the man, butting him in the chest. Siverly stumbled back, hit a small table, and sent it flying in a shower of sugared violets, its collection of small ornaments bouncing and ringing off the floor.

Jamie made for the door, then by impulse doubled back, seized the paper, which had floated to the floor, and shoved the settee into Siverly's way as the man lunged for him, murder in his eye. He'd got hold of the club again and swung it as Jamie danced back, catching him a glancing blow on the point of the shoulder that numbed his arm to the fingers.

Jamie grabbed the candlestick and flung it at Siverly's head, the candles falling in a clatter of beeswax and smoke as they went out. There were running footsteps in the hall—

servants coming.

Without the slightest hesitation, Jamie leapt onto a glove table by the window, kicked out the lights, and hurled himself through the resultant hole, catching a final ignominious blow across the arse as he did so.

He half-ran, half-hobbled straight through the formal garden, trampling roses and flower beds. Where was his horse? Had the gatekeeper taken it to the stable?

He had not. It was tied by the rein to a rail outside the lodge. Stuffing the crumpled paper into his coat, he undid the knot one-handed, blessing the Virgin Mother that Siverly had struck him on the right side. The numbness was fading, but tingling jolts buzzed down his right arm, jarring his fingers so they fumbled and twitched, all but useless. His clever left was all right, though, and before the gatekeeper had realized something was amiss and come out to see, he had flung himself onto the startled horse and was trotting down the road toward the village.

His left buttock was knotted tight, bruised from the blow, and he leaned in his saddle like a drunk, unable to put weight on it. He looked back over his shoulder, but there was no pursuit. *And why should there be?* he thought, breathing heavily. Siverly knew where to find him. And find him he would; the verse was only a copy, but Siverly didn't know that. Jamie touched the pocket of his coat, and the paper crackled reassuringly.

It was raining harder now, and water ran down his face. He'd left his hat and cloak; Tom Byrd would be annoyed. He smiled a little at the thought and, trembling with reaction, wiped his face on his sleeve.

He'd done his part. Now it was John Grey's turn.



A Poultice for Bruising

In order to keep from going outside every few minutes, Grey had accepted the invitation of two local men to join them at darts. One of his opponents had only one eye—or at least wore a patch over the problematic socket—but seemed little incommoded on that account, and Grey strongly suspected that the patch was mere gauze, doubled and dyed black, but no true obstacle to aim.

No stranger to sharp practice, his answer to this stratagem was the proposal that they play for pints rather than coin. This agreeable arrangement ensured that, regardless of skill or artifice, any man who won repeatedly would soon lose. The beer was good, and Grey managed for the most part not to think about what might be happening at Glastuig, but as the day drew down and the landlord began to light rush dips, he was unable to keep his thoughts at bay and thus excused himself from the game on grounds that he could no longer see to aim and stepped outside for a breath of air.

Outside, the rain had finally ceased, though the plants all bore such a burden of water that merely brushing the grass by the path soaked his stockings.

Quinn had gone off on unstated business of his own—and Grey would not have made a confidant of the Irishman in any case. Tom also had disappeared; Mr. Beckett had a comely daughter who served in the public room, but she had

vanished, replaced by her mother. Grey didn't mind, but he would have liked to have someone with whom to share his worry over Jamie Fraser's prolonged absence.

There were of course excellent possible reasons for it. Siverly might have been intrigued by the poem, or by Fraser, and thus invited him to stay for supper in order to carry on their conversation. That would be the best possibility, Grey supposed.

Less good, but still acceptable, was the possibility—well, call it likelihood, given the state of the roads—that Fraser's horse had thrown a shoe or gone lame on the way back and had had to be walked, taken to a farrier, or, at worst, shot. They had sent back the livery's horses; Fraser was riding a nag borrowed from Mr. Beckett.

Running down the list of increasingly dire possibilities, Grey thought of highwaymen, who were attracted by the horse (surely not; the thing looked like a cow, and an elderly cow at that) and had then noticed the gaudy vest and shot Fraser when he was unable to produce any money. (He should have insisted Jamie have money; it wasn't right to keep him penniless.) A larger than usual mudhole that had forced him off the road, there to fall into a quaking bog, which had promptly swallowed him and the horse. A sudden apoplexy—Fraser had once mentioned that his father had died of an apoplexy. Were such things hereditary?

"Or perhaps a goose fell dead out of the sky and hit him on the head," he muttered, kicking viciously at a stone on the path. It shot into the air, struck a fence post, and ricocheted back, striking him smartly on the shin.

"Me lord?"

Clutching his shin, he looked up to see Tom hovering in the gloaming. At first assuming that his valet had been attracted by his cry of pain, he straightened up, dismissing it —but then saw the agitation of Tom's countenance.

"What—"

"Come with me, me lord," Tom said, low-voiced, and, glancing over his shoulder, led the way through a thick growth of weeds and brambles that put paid altogether to Grey's stockings.

Behind the pub, Tom led the way around a ramshackle chicken run and beckoned Grey toward an overgrown hedge.

"He's in here," he whispered, holding up a swath of branches.

Grey crouched down and beheld an extremely cross-looking James Fraser, ribbon lost, hair coming out of its plait, and a good bit of his face obscured by dried blood. He was hunched to one side and held one shoulder stiffly, higher than the other. The light under the hedge was dim, but there was sufficient left to make out the glare in the slanted blue eyes.

"Why are you sitting in the hedge, Mr. Fraser?" he inquired, having rapidly considered and discarded several other inquiries as being perhaps impolitic.

"Because if I go inside the pub at suppertime looking like this, the whole countryside is going to be talkin' about it by dawn, speculating about who did it. And everyone in said public house kens perfectly well that I'm wi' you. Meaning that Major Siverly will ken it's you on his trail by the time he's finished his coffee tomorrow morning." He shifted slightly and drew in his breath.

"Are you badly hurt?"

"I am not," Fraser said testily. "It's only bruises."

"Er ... your face is covered with blood, sir," Tom said helpfully, in a tone suggesting that Fraser might not have noticed this, and then added, in substantially more horrified tones, "It's got onto your waistcoat!"

Fraser shot Tom a dark look suggesting that he meant to say something cutting about waistcoats, but whatever it was, he swallowed it, turning back to Grey.

"A wee shard o' glass cut my head, is all. It stopped

bleeding some while ago. All I need is a wet cloth."

From the slow difficulty with which Fraser wormed his way out of the hedge, Grey rather thought a bit more than a wet cloth might be needed but forbore saying so.

"What happened?" he asked instead. "Was it an accident?"

"No." Fraser rolled clumsily onto hands and knees, got one knee up, foot braced—and then stopped, clearly contemplating the mechanical considerations involved in getting to his feet. Without comment, Grey stooped, got him under the left arm, and levered him into a standing position, this operation being accompanied by a muffled groan.

"I showed the poem to Siverly," Fraser said, jerking his coat straight. "He pretended not to know me, but he did. He read it, asked me who I was, then tried to dismiss it as a fraud of some sort, a faked antiquity. Then I turned my back to take my leave, and he tried to kill me." Despite obvious pain, he gave Grey a lopsided smile. "I suppose ye'd call that evidence, aye?"

"I would, yes." Grey gave him back the smile. "Thank you, Mr. Fraser."

"Ye're most welcome," Fraser said politely.

Tom arrived at this point with a bowl of water, a cloth, and an anxious-looking young woman.

"Oh, sir," she cried, seeing Fraser. "Mr. Tom said ye'd been thrown off your horse, the wicked creature, and into a ditch on your head! Are ye damaged at all?"

Fraser looked utterly outraged at the notion that he might have been thrown by an aged mare—plainly this excuse for his appearance would never have occurred to him—but he luckily refrained from speaking his mind and submitted with grimaces to having his face swabbed clean. With ill grace and to the accompaniment of much sympathetic—and some derisive—comment from the taproom, he allowed Grey and Tom to assist him up the stairs, it having become obvious that he could not raise his left knee more than an inch or

two. They lowered him upon the bed, whereat he gave an agonized cry and rolled onto one side.

"What's the matter?" Tom asked anxiously. "Have you injured your spine, Captain? Ye could be paralyzed, if it's your spine. Can ye wiggle your toes?"

"It's no my spine," Fraser said through his teeth. "It's my arse."

It would have seemed odd to leave the room, so Grey remained, but in deference to what he assumed to be Fraser's sensibilities, he stood back and allowed Tom to help Fraser remove his breeches, averting his own gaze without being obvious about it.

A shocked exclamation from Tom made him look, though, and he echoed it with his own.

"Jesus Christ! What the devil did he do to you?" Fraser halflay on the bed, shirt rucked up to display the damage. Nearly the whole of Fraser's left buttock was an ugly purplish-blue, surrounding a swollen contusion that was almost black.

"I told ye," Fraser said grouchily, "he tried to cave my heid in. With a sort of club wi' a knob on one end."

"He's got the devil of a bad aim."

Fraser didn't actually laugh, but his scowl relaxed a little.

"What you want," Tom informed him, "is a poultice for bruising. Me mam would make one out of brick dust and egg and a bit of pounded milk thistle, when me and me brothers would get a black eye or summat of the kind."

"I believe there is a distinct shortage of brick dust in the neighborhood," Grey said. "But you might see what your inamorata recommends in the nature of a poultice, Tom."

"Likely a handful of manure," Fraser muttered.

In the event, Tom returned with the landlord's wife, bearing a moist cloth full of sliced, charred onions, which she applied, with many expressions of sympathetic horror (punctuated by loud expressions of astonishment as to how

such a kind, sweet horse as our Bedelia, and her so gentle a soul as could have given our Lord a ride into Jerusalem, might ever have come to give the gentleman such a cruel toss, which made Fraser grind his teeth audibly), to the sufferer's shoulder, leaving the more delicate application to Tom.

Owing to the nature of his injuries, Fraser could not lie comfortably on his back, or on either side, and was obliged to lie on his stomach, the bad shoulder cradled by a pillow and the air of the chamber perfumed with the eye-watering fragrance of hot onions.

Grey lounged against the wall by the window, now and then looking out, just in case Siverly might have organized some sort of pursuit, but the darkening road remained empty.

From the corner of his eye, he could see the woman completing her ministrations. She went and came again with a second poultice, then climbed the stairs once more, puffing slightly, with a dram of whiskey, which she held carefully with one hand, lifting Fraser's head with the other to help him drink, though he resisted this assistance.

The movement had disarranged the first poultice, and she pulled back the neck of Fraser's shirt to replace it. The firelight glinted across the white scars, clearly visible across his shoulder blade, and she gave a single, shocked click of the tongue when she saw them. She gave Grey a hard, straight look, then, with great gentleness but a tight mouth, she straightened the shirt, unplaited Jamie's hair and combed it, then braided it loosely and bound it with a bit of string.

Grey was conscious of a sudden lurch within, watching sparks of copper glint from the thick dark-red strands that slid through the woman's fingers. A sharp spurt of what began as simple jealousy ended as a sense of baffled longing as he saw Fraser, eyes closed, relax and turn his cheek into the pillow, his body yielding, unthinking, compliant to the woman's touch.

When she had done, she went out, glancing sidelong at Tom. He looked at Grey and, receiving a nod of assent, went downstairs after her.

Grey himself poked up the fire and then sat down on a stool beside the bed.

"Do you need to sleep?" he inquired, rather gruffly.

The slanted blue eyes opened at once.

"No." Fraser raised himself gingerly, weight resting on his left forearm. "Jesus, that hurts!"

Grey reached into his portmanteau and withdrew his flask, which he handed over.

"Brandy," he said.

"Thank you," Fraser said fervently, and uncorked it. Grey sat down again, with a small glow of gratification.

"Tell me, if you will, exactly what happened."

Fraser obliged, pausing periodically to swallow brandy, wipe his eyes, or blow his nose, as the onion fumes made these run profusely.

"So, plainly he recognized the poem," Grey said. "Which is reasonable; it confirms our original assumption that it had something to do with Siverly, as Carruthers had made a point of including it. What is more interesting is his question to you: 'Who are you?' That implies that the answer was something other than your name, does it not? Particularly if, as you say, he recognized you."

Fraser nodded. "Aye, it does. It also implies that there are people he doesna ken personally, but who might be expected to recognize that poem—and to seek out others o' the same ilk, using the poem as a signal. In other words—"

"A conspiracy," Grey said, with a feeling between dread and excitement settling in his stomach.

Fraser gave a small grunt of assent and, handing back the half-empty flask, eased himself down, grimacing.

"What sort of conspiracy do you think it is, Mr. Fraser?" Grey asked, watching him closely. The Scot's mouth tightened for a moment, but he'd plainly already done his thinking on the matter, for he answered without hesitation.

"Politics. There's a wee reference in the poem to a white rose. That canna mean anything but Jacobites." He spoke in a tone of absolute conviction.

"Ah." Grey paused, then, striving for casualness, said, "I don't believe you mentioned the white rose in your original translation."

Fraser blew his nose with a vicious honk. "No," he said calmly, sniffing, "nor after I showed it to Captain Lally. Neither did he."

"And yet you tell me now," Grey observed.

Fraser gave him a sideways look, put out a hand for the flask, and drank more brandy, as though considering his answer, though Grey was reasonably sure he'd considered it extensively already.

"Now it's real," he said finally, putting down the flask. He shifted a little, grimacing. "Ye wouldna ken, but in the time before the Rising in Scotland, and to nay little extent after, there were dozens—nay, hundreds—of tiny conspiracies. Plots, suggestions o' plots, hints of plots—any man who could hold a pen writing coded letters, talking of money, praising his own connections, and blackening the names of others—and nearly all of it nothing but wind."

He wiped his eyes, sneezed, and wiped his nose.

"Jesus, I may never eat onions again."

"Does it help? With the pain, I mean."

Fraser looked surprised, as though it had never occurred to him to wonder.

"Aye, it does; it warms the sore parts." His mouth twitched. "That, or maybe it's the brandy." He cleared his throat. "Anyway. I saw hundreds of things like that, in Paris. For a time, it was my business to look for such things. That's where I made the acquaintance of your sister-in-law."

Jamie spoke casually, but Grey saw the Scot's sidelong look and manfully concealed his own surprise.

"Yes, Hal said her father was a ... dealer in documents."

"That's a verra tactful way to put it." He sniffed and looked up, one eyebrow raised. "I'm surprised that she didna tell ye about the white rose herself," he said. "She must ha' seen it." And then his gaze sharpened. "Oh," he said, with a half smile. "Of course, she did. I should have kent that."

"You should," Grey agreed dryly. "But you said, 'Now it's real.' Why? Only because Siverly is involved in some way?"

Jamie nodded and shifted himself, looking for a more comfortable way to lie. He settled for resting his forehead on his crossed forearms.

"Because Siverly's rich," he said, his voice a little muffled. "Whether he stole his money or made it, we ken he's got it, do we not?"

"We do," Grey said, a little grimly. "Or at least he had it at one point. For all I know, he's spent it on all on whores and horses. Or that monstrous great house."

Fraser made a motion of the head that might have been agreement.

"Either way, he has something to lose," he said. "And there's the minor consideration that he tried, verra seriously, to kill me." He raised his head from the pillow, squinting at Grey. "He'll try again, aye?" he observed, though without much concern. "Ye havena got much more than tomorrow morning before he turns up here."

"I mean to call upon Major Siverly in the morning," Grey assured him. "But you have not completely answered my question, Mr. Fraser. You said, 'Now it's real,' and I understand that. But should not the possibility of a substantial conspiracy, well funded and decently managed, increase your loyalty to the Stuart cause?"

Fraser laid his head on his arms, but turned his face

toward Grey and studied him for some time, eyes narrowed.

"I shall never fight in that cause again," he said at last, softly, and Grey thought he spoke with a sense of true regret. "Not from cowardice, but from the sure knowledge of its futility. Major Siverly's nay friend to me. And should there be men I know involved in this ... I will do them nay service to let it go further."

He turned his face away again and lay quiet.

Grey picked up the flask and shook it. There was very little left in it, but he drank this, slowly, watching the play of fire through the tangled strands of the peat bricks in the hearth.

Was Fraser telling the truth? He thought so. If so—was his assessment of that one phrase in the poem sufficient as to conjure up a complete Jacobite conspiracy? But that wasn't the only evidence, he reminded himself. Minnie had said the same—and, above all, Siverly's attempt on Fraser's life argued that the poem itself was dangerous in some way. How else if not, as Fraser said, a signal of recognition? But a signal to whom?

He fell to thinking of how his meeting with Siverly might go, knowing what he now did. Ought he, too, present a copy of the same poem, to see what response it drew? He had made a point of seeking out Siverly after the Battle of Quebec, to thank him for his service in saving Grey from being brained by a tomahawk. Siverly had modestly dismissed the matter—but it would plainly be foremost in his mind at sight of Grey.

Grey grimaced. Yes, he owed Siverly a debt of honor. But if Siverly had done half what Carruthers claimed, he had forfeited his right to such consideration.

The room was warm. He loosened his neckcloth, which made him think of his dress uniform, its leather stock and silver gorget. Tom had packed it with great care, preserving it from loss and damage on the journey, for the sole purpose of being worn to arrest Gerald Siverly, if necessary.

Had the time come for that? He thought not yet. He'd take with him not only the poem but a few selected sheets from Carruthers's packet and, depending upon Siverly's reception of him, would decide whether—and which—to show him. Showing the poem would link him immediately with Jamie Fraser, and thus perhaps threaten Siverly. If he could persuade Siverly to go back to England voluntarily, that was by far the best result. But if not ... He brooded for a bit, but he was sick of thinking of Siverly, and his mind wandered. The scent of onions had subsided to a pleasant odor that conjured thoughts of supper. It was very late. Perhaps he should go down; he could have the girl bring something up for Fraser....

Once more he saw the woman's hands, gentle on Fraser's face and body, and the big Scot turning at once to her touch, a stranger's touch. Only because she was a woman. If he himself had ventured to touch the man ...

But I have. If not directly. The open neck of the shirt had slipped back, and the faint glimmer of the scars showed once more.

Jamie's head turned, and his eyes opened, as though he had felt the pressure of Grey's gaze. He didn't speak but lay quiet, meeting John's eyes. Grey was conscious all at once of the silence; the pub's customers had all gone home, the landlord and his family retired for the night.

"I'm sorry," he said, very softly.

"Ego te absolvo," Fraser murmured, and shut his eyes.



Glastuig

The bay gelding was lame in the right fore, and John Grey had declined to ride the unfortunate Bedelia, on grounds that she would be instantly recognized, thus establishing a link between himself and Jamie Fraser and causing Major Siverly to smell a rat. He therefore walked the two miles from Beckett's inn to Siverly's estate, Glastuig, reciting Latin poetry as a means of keeping his thoughts off the impending meeting.

He'd done what planning was possible. Once the strategy and tactics of a battle were decided, you put it out of your mind until you came to the field and saw what was what. Trying to fight a battle in your head was pointless and did nothing but fret the nerves and exhaust the energies.

He'd had a hearty breakfast of black pudding and buttered eggs with toasted soda bread, washed down with Mr. Beckett's very good beer. Thus internally fortified, and dressed in a country gentleman's good wool suit—complete with gaiters to save his lisle stockings from the mud—and with several documents carefully stowed in separate pockets, he was armed and ready.

Qui nunc it per iter tenebricosum illuc, unde negant redire quemquam.

Now he goes along the dark road, thither whence they say no man returns.

It was a very beautiful morning, and a small group of pigs were enjoying it to the maximum, snorting and rooting under a tumbled stone wall. Aside from these, the landscape seemed entirely empty, until after a mile or so a woman in a shawl came past him in the lane, leading an ass with a small boy sitting on it. He lifted his hat politely to the woman and wished her good morning. All of them stared at him, the woman and the boy turning round in order to keep staring after they'd passed him. Possibly strangers were not common in the neighborhood, he thought.

This conclusion was borne out when he rapped his walking stick on the door of Siverly's manor, and a weedy-looking young butler with astonishingly vivid ginger hair and a large quantity of freckles blinked at him as though he'd sprung out from behind a mushroom.

"I've come to call upon Major Siverly," Grey said politely. "My name is Grey."

"Is it?" said the butler uncertainly. "You're an Englishman, I daresay?"

"Yes, it is," Grey assured him. "And, yes, I am. Is your master at home?"

"Well, he is, then, but—" The man glanced over his shoulder at a closed door on the far side of a spacious foyer. "Oh!" A thought seemed to strike him, and he looked back at Grey with the air of one who has successfully put two and two together to make four.

"You'll be after being a friend of the other Englishman, sure!"

"The ... other Englishman?"

"Why, the one what rode over this morning from Brampton Court!" the butler exclaimed happily. "He's in the library with the master, and them talking away sixteen to the dozen. They'll be expecting you, then, won't they?"

"Oh, to be sure," Grey said cordially, wondering what the devil he was about to walk in to but walking after the butler, nonetheless.

The butler pulled open the beautifully carved door to the library and bowed with an extravagant gesture, ushering Grey in.

He was looking for Siverly and therefore saw him at once, the major looking up with surprise from what looked like a pair of account books.

"Major Siverly—" he began, infusing his voice with warmth. But then he caught sight of the major's companion, seated across the desk from Siverly, and the words stuck in his throat.

"What on earth—Bulstrode, what the devil are you at?" Siverly barked at the butler, who blinked, bewildered. "Haven't I told you not to bring visitors in unannounced?"

"I—I thought—" The hapless butler was stuttering, glancing wildly back and forth between Grey and Edward Twelvetrees, who was staring at Lord John with a look somewhere between astonishment and outrage.

"Oh, go away, you clot," Siverly said irritably, getting up and shooing the butler off. "Colonel Grey! What a pleasant surprise. You must forgive the ... er ... unorthodox welcome." He smiled, though with considerable reservation in his eyes. "Allow me to make you acquainted with Captain __"

"We've met." Twelvetrees's words were as clipped as bits of wire. He stood up slowly, keeping his eyes fixed on Grey as he closed the ledger in front of him. Not before Grey had time to see that it contained a listing of what looked like fairly large sums.

And speaking of sums—there was an ironbound chest sitting on the desk, its lid open, more than half filled with a quantity of small wash-leather bags, each tied round with string. Under the bay window, the lid of a blanket chest stood open. A depression in the blankets showed where the ironbound chest had rested. Siverly's eyes darted toward this, and his hand twitched, but he stayed it, evidently not wanting to draw attention to the chest by closing it.

"What are you doing here?" Twelvetrees asked coldly.

Grey took a deep breath. Nothing for it but charge straight in.

"I came to pay a call on Major Siverly," he said mildly. "And you?"

Twelvetrees's mouth pursed a little. "Just happened to be in the neighborhood, eh?"

"No, I came particularly to speak with the major about a matter of some importance. But of course I have no wish to intrude," Grey said, with a brief bow to Siverly. "Perhaps I might come again at some more convenient occasion?"

Siverly was looking back and forth between Grey and Twelvetrees, plainly trying to fathom what was going on.

"No, no, do stay," he said. "I must confess—a matter of importance, you said?" His face was not particularly mobile, but he wasn't a good cardplayer, and wariness and calculation flickered over his slab-sided features.

"A private matter," Grey said, smiling pleasantly at Twelvetrees, who was surveying him through narrowed eyes. "As I say, a more convenient—"

"I'm sure Captain Twelvetrees will excuse us for a few moments," Siverly interrupted. "Edward?"

Christian names, is it? Grey thought. Well, well.

"Certainly." Twelvetrees moved slowly toward the door, eyes like a pair of pistol barrels fixed on Grey.

"No, no," Siverly said, gesturing him back to his seat. "You stay here, Edward; Bulstrode will bring some tea. Colonel Grey and I will just take a stroll down to the summerhouse and back."

Grey bowed to Twelvetrees, keeping a charming smile on

his face, and followed Siverly out of the library, feeling Twelvetrees's eyes burning holes between his shoulder blades.

Hastily, he reviewed his strategy as he followed Siverly's broad back across the freshly rolled lawn. At least he wasn't going to have to carry out his inquisition in front of Twelvetrees, but he'd have to assume that anything he said might well be conveyed to "Edward."

"What a beautiful property," he said, as they rounded the corner of the house. It was true; the lawns spread a stately distance before and behind, and edging the back lawn were terraces of roses and other flowering bushes, with a walled garden to the left that was likely the kitchen garden; Grey saw what looked like espaliered fruit trees poking up above the plastered wall. In the distance, beyond the formal terraces, was a charming small white summerhouse, standing on the edge of an ornamental wood, and, beyond that, the stables.

"Thank you," Siverly said, a note of pride in his voice. "I've been improving it, these last few years." But he was not a man to be distracted by compliments. "You did say ...?" He turned to Grey, one steel-gray eyebrow raised.

"Yes." In for a penny, in for a pound. Grey felt something of the giddy recklessness he experienced when plunging into a fight. "Do you by chance recall an adjutant named Charles Carruthers? He was with one of your companies in Quebec."

"Carruthers," Siverly said, a mildly questioning tone in his voice—but it was plain from his face that the name was familiar to him.

"He had a deformed hand," Grey said. He disliked reducing Charlie to such a description, but it was the quickest and surest way forward.

"Oh, yes. Of course." Siverly's broad, pockmarked brow lowered a bit. "But he's dead. I'm sure I heard that he was dead. Measles, was it? Some sort of ague?"

"He is dead, I'm afraid." Grey's hand dipped into his coat, hoping he remembered which pocket he'd put the folded paper in. He pulled it out but held it in his hand, not offering it yet to Siverly.

"Do you know my brother, by chance?"

"Your brother?" Siverly now looked frankly puzzled, "The duke? Yes, of course. I know of him, I mean; we aren't personally acquainted."

"Yes. Well, he has come into possession of a rather curious set of documents, compiled by Captain Carruthers. Concerning you."

"Concerning me? What the devil—" Siverly snatched the paper from Grey's hand, anger flaring so suddenly in his eyes that Grey had an instant apprehension of how some of the incidents Charlie had described had come about. The violence in the man was simmering just below the skin; he saw only too well how Siverly had come so close to killing Jamie Fraser.

Siverly read the page quickly, crushed it in his hand, and threw it to the ground. A vein stood out on his temple, pulsing blue under his skin, which had gone an unpleasant purplish color.

"What balderdash is this?" he said, his voice thick with rage. "How dare you come bringing me such whinging, blithering—"

"Do you deny that there is any truth in Captain Carruthers's account?" The page was one regarding the events leading to the mutiny in Canada. There were more damning pages—many of them—but Grey had thought to start with something clear-cut.

"I deny that Pardloe has any right to question me in the slightest particular! And as for you, sir—" Siverly loomed suddenly over Grey, fists clenched. "Damn you for an interfering, busy-bodying fool! Get out of my sight."

Before Grey could move or speak, Siverly had whirled on

his heel and stamped off, moving like an ox with its tail on fire.

Grey blinked, belatedly realized that he was holding his breath, and exhaled. The summerhouse was twenty feet away; he went and sat on the steps to collect himself.

"So much for gentle persuasion," he said under his breath. Siverly had already reached the lawn and was forging up it to the house, making the occasional furious gesture en route.

Plainly an alternative plan would have to be put in train. But in the meantime, there was a good deal to think about. Edward Twelvetrees, for one. That ironbound chest, for another.

Grey had been in the army in one capacity or another since the age of sixteen. He knew what a paymaster's books looked like—and, likewise, a paymaster's chest. Clearly Twelvetrees and Siverly were involved in something together that involved the disbursement of funds—and fairly considerable funds—to a number of individuals.

Siverly had disappeared into the house. Grey continued to sit for a little, thinking, but could come to no firm conclusions. Obviously, Siverly wasn't going to tell him anything about the paymaster's chest. Perhaps it would be worth riding over to Brampton Court—that's where the butler had said Twelvetrees was staying—and trying to inveigle information out of the other conspirator. At least he was reasonably sure that Twelvetrees wouldn't try to kill him out of hand. Though it might be as well to bring his dagger.

Just as Grey rose to his feet, Twelvetrees himself came out of the house and, looking out across the lawn, saw Grey at the summerhouse. He lowered his head and came down, looking bitter and determined.

Grey waited.

Twelvetrees was slightly flushed when he arrived but had himself well in hand. None of Siverly's volcanic passion showed in that lean, long-nosed face. There was hostility, to be sure, and considerable dislike.

"You should leave, Colonel Grey," he said without preamble. "And do not come back. I tell you this for your own good; there is no profit in pestering Major Siverly, no matter what your motive—and I confess I cannot make that out. No, don't tell me—" He held up a minatory hand. "I don't care. Neither do you need to know what my motives are. Suffice it to say that you meddle in matters that you do not understand, and if you continue to do so, you will regret it."

He made to turn on his heel, but Grey, moved by impulse, put out a hand and grasped his sleeve.

"A moment, Captain, if you please." He groped with his free hand for his waistcoat pocket and pulled out another sheet of paper—one of the copies of the Wild Hunt verse. "Look at this."

Twelvetrees looked as though he meant to jerk away, but instead seized the paper impatiently and opened it.

He didn't even read it but turned pale at sight of the words.

"Where did you get this?" he said, his voice nearly a whisper.

"From Charlie Carruthers," Grey said. "I see you recognize it. Do you—"

He never got to complete the sentence. Twelvetrees shoved the paper into his chest so hard that he took a step backward to avoid falling. He caught his balance, but Twelvetrees was already striding away across the little flagstone walk. Grey caught sight of a snail on the stone. Twelvetrees's shoe came down upon the animal with an audible crunch. He paid no attention but forged blindly on, leaving a small, wet stain glimmering on the flags.



Plan B

The next day dawned sullen and overcast but not actually raining. Yet. Grey dressed carefully in his uniform, Tom Byrd assisting him with the same sense of solemn ceremony as though preparing Grey for battle. Leather stock, gorget, polished boots ... Grey hesitated for a moment over wearing his dagger, but in the end, thinking of Siverly's attack on Jamie Fraser, put it in his belt.

Fraser leaned against the window frame, half-sitting on the sill, watching the preparations with a small frown. He'd offered to go with Grey, but John had declined, thinking that his presence could not but inflame Siverly. It was going to be a sufficiently sticky interview without introducing further complications.

"If I don't come back," he told Fraser at the door, "you have my explicit permission to do whatever you like to Siverly." He'd meant it as a joke, but the Scotsman nodded soberly.

"I'll take your body home to your brother."

Tom Byrd made a horrified noise, but Grey smiled, affecting to think this a witty riposte to his own feeble jest.

"Yes, you do that," he said, and went downstairs, bootheels thumping.

The butler at Glastuig opened the door to him, eyes wide at seeing him in his uniform.

"I will see your master, if you please," Grey informed him, stepping inside without invitation. "Where is he?"

The butler gave way, flustered.

"The master's not in the house, sir!"

"Where is he, then?"

The man's mouth worked for a moment and he glanced from side to side, looking for a suitable answer, but he was too discomposed by the uniform to lie.

"Why ... he's out in the summerhouse, to be sure. He often sits out there of a morning. But he—"

Grey nodded and turned on his heel, leaving the butler dithering behind him.

He walked across the lawn toward the folly, rehearing what to say—and thinking what to do next if his reasoning did not move Siverly. He had very little expectation that it would, but he owed it to his own sense of fairness to give the man a chance to come back voluntarily.

If not ... then he'd come back under arrest. The slightly sticky part being that Grey had no formal authority in Ireland, still less the authority to arrest anyone, and Siverly almost certainly knew that. Grey could do it legally, by requesting the justiciar at Athlone to send a party of soldiers to bring Siverly to the castle—if the justiciar saw the matter in the same light—there to be formally handed over to Grey, who would then serve as a military escort to see Siverly into the custody of the British army.

This supposed, though, that Siverly would remain in situ while Grey rode to Athlone and back, that the justiciar's deputy (the justiciar being presumably a-wooing in France at the moment) would be moved by the force of Grey's argument to arrest an obviously wealthy and locally esteemed man and then submit him to the mercies of a foreign government, and that Siverly would in turn meekly submit to the justiciar's men. Frankly, Grey thought the odds low on all three fronts.

The alternative was summary arrest—well, kidnapping, if you wanted to be blunt about it—carried out by Grey and Jamie Fraser, with Tom Byrd holding the horses. Grey was strongly inclined to favor this line of action, and he knew that Fraser would be only too pleased to assist him.

While it had the appeal of directness—plus the additional charming possibility of collateral damage sustained by Siverly in the course of resisting arrest—he didn't delude himself that it would be simple. They'd have to get Siverly across half of Ireland and onto a ship without attracting undue attention—in a country where he spoke the local language and they didn't.

"Needs must when the devil drives," he muttered, and stamped heavily up the steps of the folly, in order to give Siverly fair warning of his advent. He thought he heard movement inside, but as his head came above the top of the steps, the folly appeared to be empty.

He'd been a soldier for a long time, though, and the sense of danger struck him so acutely that he ducked before realizing consciously that anything was wrong. Crouched on the steps with his heart hammering, he grasped his dagger and listened for all he was worth. He heard a loud rustling of the shrubbery behind the folly and instantly leapt up, ran down the steps and round the folly.

Siverly had made it into the ornamental wood; Grey couldn't see the man, but he heard the snap and crunch of a body forcing its way through undergrowth in a hurry. Follow, or go round?

He hesitated for no more than an instant, then ran to the left. The man must be heading for the stables; he could cut him off.

He vaguely saw servants in the distance, pointing at him and shouting, but paid them no mind. He'd lost his hat, but that didn't matter, either. He galloped through the kitchen garden, leaping a basket of turnip greens set dead in the middle of the walk, and dodging the openmouthed cook who'd set it there.

The gate was shut, and he didn't bother fumbling for the latch but seized it with both hands and vaulted over, feeling an absurd rush of fierce pleasure in the feat. A short, destructive dash through a terrace of rosebushes, and the stables loomed ahead of him. The big sliding door was closed; Siverly hadn't got out yet. He wrenched the door open and charged into the dim-lit stable, where his tumultuous advent startled a number of horses, who snorted and whinnied, dancing and curvetting in their stalls. He ignored them all and stood panting in the center of the aisle, facing the door at the opposite end.

The guilty flee where no man pursueth. The words came to him and he would have laughed, if he'd had breath. He hadn't wanted any more proof of Siverly's guilt, but this open admission by flight would give Grey the excuse to make an immediate arrest.

It occurred to him vaguely that Siverly outweighed him by at least three stone and might be armed, but he dismissed the thought. He had the advantage of surprise here, and meant to use it. He took up a position to the side of the sliding door and stepped into a narrow alcove used for storing tack.

The horses had calmed down, still snorting and bobbing their heads but now beginning to munch hay again. He heard the rumbling as the sliding door opened—but it was the wrong door, the one he'd come in by. He risked a quick glance out of his hiding place but saw only a groom, pitchfork and manure shovel in hand. He ducked back, muttering, "Shit," under his breath. He didn't need a witness, let alone one armed with a pitchfork, who would likely come to his master's aid.

The groom's eyes flicked from side to side, though, instantly sensing something amiss among the horses. He

dropped the shovel with a clang and advanced toward Grey's end of the stable, fork held menacingly before him.

"Come on! Let's be havin' ye out of there!"

Not much help for it. Grey tucked his dagger out of sight and stepped out into the aisle.

"Good morning," he said pleasantly. "Is your master about?"

The groom halted, blinking at this crimson-clad apparition.

"And who the divil are you? Sir," he added uncertainly.

"An acquaintance of Major Siverly's. Grey is my name," he added helpfully.

The man, middle-aged and possessed of a head like a cannonball, paused, blinking suspiciously. Grey wondered whether he'd ever met an Englishman—but of course he must have; Edward Twelvetrees had visited here.

"How does your honor come to be in the stable, eh?" The pitchfork stayed steady. Surely the idiot didn't take him for a horse thief?

"The butler told me Major Siverly was here, of course." Grey allowed a certain impatience to creep into his tone, all too aware that Siverly himself might come in at any moment. So much for his ambush! He'd just have to put the best face on it he could and inveigle Siverly into walking back to the house with him. Once out of pitchfork reach ...

"Himself's not here."

"Yes, I noticed that. I'll ... um ... look for him outside." Before he could be forcibly escorted out with a pitchfork aimed at the seat of his breeches, he whirled on his heel and strode briskly toward the door. The groom came after him, but slowly.

He was mentally cursing his luck and trying to think how best to deal with Siverly—but was saved the effort, as Siverly was not in fact advancing on the stable. A paddock and a field lay between the stable and the little wood where the folly stood, and both were empty. Grey said a bad word.

"Your honor?" said the groom, startled.

"Are all the horses in the stable?" he demanded, turning on the groom. The man eyed him narrowly, but the pitchfork was now resting tines on the ground, thank God. The groom scratched his head slowly.

"What would they be doing there, for all love? There's Bessie and Clover out with the big wagon, and the gray mare and her colt with the others in the upper field, and—"

"Saddle horses, for God's sake!"

"Oh, saddle horses, is it?" The groom was at last beginning to be moved by his urgency, and wrinkled his brow. He squinted off to the left, where Grey perceived several horses switching their tails in a distant field. "Well, there's the four up there—that's Richard Lionheart, and Istanbul, and Marco, and—"

"Will you just for God's sake tell me if any are missing?" Grey's urgency was taking on a sense of nightmare, the sort of dream where one strove to make progress through some sucking bog, only to encounter the walls of an endless maze.

"No, your honor." Before the words were fully out of the groom's mouth, Grey was striding back toward the folly, the sense of nightmare growing.

It wasn't Siverly's alarm at his presence that he'd sensed on the steps of the folly. It was acute, impending danger, a sense of harm. He was running now, ignoring the groom's shout behind him.

He took the steps of the folly in two great strides, smelling it before he saw it, what he must have smelled faintly before, but so much stronger now, and his foot came down in the blood and slid out from under him. He waved his arms, staggering to keep his balance, and fetched up hard against the railing of the folly, breathless and choked with the smell of it, the whiff of death now full-blown and reeking at his feet.



Clishmaclayer

Jamie had borrowed a book from Pardloe's library, a pocket edition of Homer's Iliad, in Greek. He'd not read Greek in some years, and thought perhaps to renew his acquaintance with the language, but distraction of mind was interfering with his concentration.

Not thus the lion glories in his might, Nor panther braves his spotted foe in fight, Nor thus the boar (those terrors of the plain;) Man only vaunts his force, and vaunts in vain.

He'd last spoken Greek in Ardsmuir prison, trading bits of Aristophanes with Lord John over a makeshift supper of porridge and sliced ham, the rations being short even in the governor's quarters, owing to a storm that had kept regular supplies from being delivered. There had been claret to wash it down with, though, and it had been a cordial evening. He'd taken care of the bits of business that needed to be done on behalf of the prisoners, and then they'd played chess, a long, drawn-out duel that had lasted nearly 'til dawn. Grey had won, at last, and had hesitated, glancing at the battered sofa in his office, clearly wondering whether he might offer Jamie the use of it, rather than send him back to the cells for an hour's sleep before the prisoners rose.

Jamie had appreciated the thought, but it wouldn't do, and he'd set his face impassively, bowed correctly, and bade Lord John good night, himself rapping on the doorframe to summon the dozing guard.

"Merde," he said under his breath. He'd been sitting on the bench outside the inn, gazing down the road with the book open on his knee, for God knew how long. Now it had come on to rain, and wee drops stippled the page, brushing soft against his face.

He wiped the page hastily with his sleeve and went inside, putting the book in his pocket. Tom Byrd was sitting by the hearth, helping young Moira Beckett wind her fresh-dyed yarn. He'd been making sheep's eyes at Moira, but at the sound of Jamie's entrance, his head swiveled round like a compass needle.

Jamie shook his head slightly, and Tom grimaced, but then turned back to Moira.

"D'you know what time it is, Miss Beckett?" Tom asked politely.

"About half-three, so it is," she replied, looking a little startled. Jamie suppressed a smile. She'd turned her head to look out the window at the light, just as Jamie had when Tom asked the question. The notion that anyone would not be able to know what time it was by the light was clearly foreign to her, but Tom was a Londoner bred and born, and thus never out of hearing of the bells of one church or another.

"I s'pose his lordship must be having a good visit with his friend," Tom offered, looking to Jamie for confirmation.

"Aye, well, I hope he had a more cordial reception than I did." Grey had left for Glastuig just after ten; it was no more than a half hour's ride. Five hours was surely a portent of something, but whether it might be good news or bad ...

He shook his head and went upstairs. He sat by the window and opened his book again, but could not bend

either eye or mind to the tragedy of Hector's ignominious death.

If it came to him having to go back to England with Grey's body and deliver him to Pardloe ... he might just take Quinn at his offer and run, he thought. But surely the wee fool would have been on his guard, knowing what had happened to him? After all—

He sat up straight, his eye catching the flicker of movement far down the road. It wasn't Grey, though; it was a man on foot, half-running, with the hitching, lolloping gait of one forcing himself past his bodily limits.

He was down the stairs and out the door, Tom Byrd on his heels, by the time the runner came within hailing distance, and they rushed to him, supporting him.

Quinn was deathly pale, drenched in sweat, and gasping for breath.

"I think ye'd best come, Jamie. Your friend's killed Major Siverly, and the constable's after arresting him."



There was a knot of people standing on the lawn, most of them gesticulating. There was a man in a sober cloth coat and good cocked hat who seemed to be in charge of the proceedings—Jamie supposed this must be the constable. Most of the other folk there were obviously the servants of the house, all talking at once and waving their arms. And in the midst of it all stood John Grey, looking vastly irritated.

He was disheveled, his hair coming out of its plait, and there were smears of mud on his uniform—*Tom Byrd willna care for that*, Jamie thought automatically. He was right; beside him, Tom gave a small squeak of outrage, and Jamie put his hand on the lad's arm to keep him quiet.

Making his way cautiously toward the little knot of people, he kept out of sight as much as he might, until he should determine how best to be of help. From twenty feet away, he saw that Grey's wrists were bound together in front of him and that the dark smears on his boots and breeks were blood, not dirt.

Grey was saying something, his voice pitched loud to be heard over the clishmaclaver, but Jamie couldn't make out what he said. Grey turned away from the constable, shaking his head in disgust—and his eye caught Jamie's. His face went from anger to calculation in an instant, and he made a brief, violent shooing gesture with one hand. "Go away," it said, clear as day.

"What are they going to do with him?" Tom whispered urgently in Jamie's ear.

"I dinna ken." Jamie faded back a step or two into the shrubbery. "They've arrested him, Quinn said. Maybe they'll take him to the local gaol."

"They can't do that!"

He glanced at Tom, whose round face was set in indignation, fists clenched at his sides.

"Aye, well, wait and see." Thoughts were running through his mind, trying to make out what it was Grey wanted him to do.

"Go out where he can see ye, wee Byrd," he said, narrowing his eyes at the scene. "They'll let ye near him, I think, as ye're his servant."

Tom gave him a wild look, but then drew himself up and nodded manfully. He stepped out of the shrubbery and walked toward the group, and Jamie saw Grey's expression of annoyance and anxiety ease a little. His own eased, as well; he'd guessed right, then.

There was a good bit of palaver and some shoving, the servants trying to keep Tom Byrd away from Grey. The young valet stood his ground, though, and Grey added his own insistence, scowling and gesturing at the constable with his bound hands. The constable looked slow and suspicious,

but he had an air about him of authority; when he lifted a hand for silence, the magpie chatter ceased.

"You're this man's valet, ye say?" Jamie could just hear, above the patter of rain on the leaves and the servants' muttering.

"I am, sir." Tom Byrd bowed deeply. "Will you let me talk to him, please?"

The constable glanced from Tom Byrd to Grey, then back. He stood in thought for some moments, but then nodded.

"Aye, go ahead. You lot!" He lifted his chin imperiously at the servants. "I want to speak to the person who found the body."

There was a general shifting and glancing to and fro, but then a maid stepped out of the throng, pushed by two of her fellow servants. She looked wild, her eyes showing white like a spooked horse, and her hands wrapped in her apron, strangling it.

"Was it you found your master, then? Go on, now, there's naught to fear," the constable said, in a tone that he probably thought was reassuring. He might as well have said that he proposed to take her straight to the hangman, for the maid wailed in terror and threw the mangled apron over her head.

One of the men with her appeared to be her husband, for he put an arm around her and stuck out his chin—trembling, but out, Jamie noted with approval—at the constable.

"She did, then, your honor, and it's quite put her out of her wits with the shock, as ye see."

"I see," the constable said rather brusquely. "Well, who the fook else saw what happened? You?"

"Oh, not me, oh, no, your honor," said the husband, turning white and stepping back, making a sign against evil. His wife shrieked, feeling his sheltering arm depart, and cowered. Her friends among the servants obligingly set up a companionable keening to keep her company, and the constable set his jaw like a bulldog against the racket, lower teeth set hard in his upper lip.

While the constable conducted his laborious investigations, and the rain began to fall more heavily, Jamie saw Grey draw Tom Byrd aside with a jerk of his head, then bend close to his ear, clearly giving instructions, glancing now and then as he did so at the shrubbery where Jamie stood hidden.

He thought he made out from the incoherent babblings of the maid that she'd found the master in the summerhouse, and as the constable seemed indisposed to go and look for himself, Jamie eased out of the shrubbery and went quietly round the back of the little wood.

More than one person had run through it; he could see that from the fresh-broken twigs and trampled ferns. He skirted the damage delicately and stole quietly up to the rear of the summerhouse. It was made with latticed panels, these interspersed with open sections, which were barred with an ornamental railing, with latticework below. Tall as he was, he could just manage to peer through this latticework by standing on his toes.

The first thing he saw was not Siverly's body, but the weapon. It was the same odd, knob-headed club with which Siverly had attacked him, and he crossed himself at the sight, with a peculiar feeling that was not satisfaction but more awe at God's sense of justice.

Grey had recognized the thing from his description; had told him it was a war club, a weapon made by the Iroquois. Hardwood, and, in the right hands, a very deadly thing. Evidently, Siverly had run into someone who knew how to employ it—the knob at the end was thick with blood and hair, and ... His eye tracked across the wide swath of blood that lay smeared over the floor of the summerhouse and came to rest on an object that he knew must be Siverly's head, only because it could be nothing else.

The man was lying with his head toward Jamie, the rest of

his body largely invisible. The blow had caved in his skull to a shocking extent; white bone showed, and rimming the wound was a pinkish ooze that he knew to be brain. He felt his gorge rise and turned round hastily, shutting his eyes and trying not to breathe, for the smell of blood and death was thick in his nose.

There was little to be learned here, and sooner or later someone would come; he couldn't be found lurking near the body. He stole quietly out through the wood, turned right, and circled round the house, coming out of the gardens near the drive, just in time to see Lord John being taken away. The constable had commandeered a wagon from the estate and rode his mule alongside, keeping a sharp eye on his prisoner. The prisoner himself sat straight as a ramrod on the wagon's seat, looking extremely cross but self-possessed. Jamie saw him say something to the constable that made the latter rear back, blinking, but then glower at Lord John and make an abrupt gesture to the wagon's driver, who clicked his tongue to the horses and set off at a trot that nearly toppled John Grey off his perch, unable to catch himself with his hands bound.

Jamie felt an angry spasm of kinship at the sight; he'd known such small cruelties when he'd worn fetters. He murmured a deliberate curse toward the constable and walked out onto the drive, where the servants were clustered accusingly round Tom Byrd.

They all fell silent at sight of Jamie, falling back a little. He ignored the lot of them and jerked his head at Tom, saying merely, "Come with me, Mr. Byrd," as he turned away down the drive.

Tom followed promptly, and while there was a hostile muttering behind them, no one hindered their departure.

"I'm that glad you come up when you did, sir," Tom said, hurrying a little to come even with him and glancing back over his shoulder. "I thought they were a-going to take me to pieces—and so did they."

"Aye, well, they're like dogs whose master's died," Jamie said, not unkindly. "They dinna ken what to do, so they howl and snap at one another. What did his lordship tell ye, wee Byrd?"

Tom was pale and excited but had control of himself. He rubbed his sleeve across his face to wipe away the rain and settled himself to recite Lord John's message.

"Right, sir. To begin with, the constable—that was the constable, the loud fat man—is taking his lordship to Castle Athlone."

"Aye? Well, that's good—it's not?" Jamie asked, seeing Tom shake his head.

"No, sir. He says the justiciar has gone to France, and whoever's in charge will either keep him locked up or make him give his parole, and that won't do."

"It won't? Did he say why not?"

"No, sir, there wasn't time. He says you must come and get him out, quick as ever you can."

Jamie rubbed a hand over his face, brushing water out of his eyebrows.

"Does he, then," he said dryly. "Did he suggest how I was to do that?"

Tom half-smiled, despite his worry.

"No, sir. He says to tell you that he trusts in your native wit and ferocity to accomplish this. I'm to help you," he added modestly, with a sideways look up at Jamie. He put a hand to his middle, looking portentous. "His lordship gave me his dagger to keep for him."

"That will be a great help," Jamie assured him gravely. "Dinna stick anyone with it unless I tell ye, though, aye? I dinna want to have to save ye both from the hangman."

The rain was coming down harder now, but as they were already wet through, there was little point in hurry, and they strode along without talking, the rain pattering on their heads and shoulders.



Escape from Athlone

Quinn had not gone back to Glastuig with them; they found him crouched by the fire with a glass of arrack in his hands, still shivering. He got up when he saw Jamie, though, and came outside at the jerk of Jamie's head.

The rain had stopped, at least for a bit, and Jamie led the way down the road so they might talk unheard. In a few words, he acquainted Quinn with the news of John Grey's arrest, which caused Quinn to cross himself piously—though Jamie could see from his face that he did not regard this as particularly unwelcome news.

He'd known pretty much what Quinn's reaction was likely to be and had decided what to do about it.

"Ye still want that cup, aye?" Jamie asked Quinn abruptly. "The *Cupán Druid riogh*?"

Quinn looked at him, wide-eyed, and grasped him by the arm.

"Ye'll never mean ye've got it, man?"

"No, I have not." Jamie detached his arm, though without violence.

"But ye know where it is." Quinn's restless eyes had stilled, fixed intently on his, and it wasn't a question.

"Aye, I know. It's well beyond anyone's reach, is where it is. I told the abbot to put it back where it came from, and to the best of my knowledge"—which is considerable, he added

silently to himself—"he did."

Quinn's lips pursed in thought. "Someone will know," he said. "All the monks had to know when they dug the poor fella up—they'll remember where he was planted, too."

"Aye. Well, ye want to go and ask them, do that—but ye're no going until we get John Grey out of Athlone."

Quinn's strange light eyes bulged a bit.

"Out of Athlone Castle? Man, are ye demented?"

"Aye, I am," Jamie said crossly. "But I mean to do it, anyway."

"Why? The man's not only English, not only your captor—he's a fecking murderer!"

"No, that he's not," Jamie said, with decision. "He may be a good many disagreeable things, but not that."

"But they found him standin' over Siverly's body, and the blood fresh on his boots!"

"I saw, aye?"

Quinn fumed visibly. "Why the devil d'ye think he didn't do the man in, then? Ye heard what he had to say about him and all his talk about bringin' the fellow to justice. Ye don't get more justice than a bullet through the head!"

There was no point in telling Quinn that Siverly's death—however administered—wouldn't have been justice in John Grey's book, save it had been preceded by a court-martial.

"He didn't," Jamie repeated stubbornly.

There was also no way to explain to Quinn what he knew to be true of John Grey. That being that the only circumstance in which Grey might possibly have killed Siverly was if he was in fear of his own life—and had that been the case, he would have said so. To Jamie, at least, via Tom Byrd.

He wasn't going to argue the point, though, and not only because it would be futile. There was also the consideration that if Grey hadn't killed Siverly, someone else had. And there were relatively few persons known to have been nearby, one of whom was Quinn. He couldn't think why Quinn might have done such a thing, but thought it wiser not to point that out, given that he proposed to continue in company with Quinn for the next wee while.

"I'm going to Athlone, and ye're goin' with me."

"What? Why?" Quinn cried, indignant. "Where d'ye get off, dragging me into it?"

"Where did you get off, dragging me into your bloody crack-brained scheme? You go with me, and I'll take ye to Abbot Michael—ye can make your own case to him about the *Cupán*."

"Crackbrained?!" Quinn went pale with indignation; his curls stood on end, nearly crackling with it.

"Aye, crackbrained. And ye're goin' with me to Athlone because ye can sail a boat, and I can't."

"A boat?" Quinn said, momentarily distracted from his affront. "What boat?"

"How do I know what boat?" Jamie said, very irritated. "We'll find one when we get there."

"But-"

"If ye think I'm going to abscond from an English prison with his lordship and try to escape through a countryside that's nay more than a monstrous bog with the occasional pig to stumble over—think again," he advised Quinn briefly.

"But—"

"Athlone Castle is nearby the River Shannon, and the justiciar said the Shannon's navigable. So we'll bloody navigate it. Come on!"



He'd given his instructions to Tom Byrd on the way back from Glastuig, and the valet had managed accordingly, not packing up all their belongings, as Jamie wished to cause no more stir than there was already, but acquiring what he could for an instant journey.

They found Tom Byrd waiting impatiently by the road with horses, a little way from the ordinary. Tom gave both men a narrow look, glancing from face to face, but said nothing. He had procured a cabbage, and a few potatoes, which he modestly displayed.

"That'll do us fine for a supper," Quinn said, patting Tom approvingly on the shoulder. He looked to the sky. "It's going to rain again," he said in resigned tones. "We'd best find a spot and cook it while we can."

Peat fires burned hot but gave little light. The fire at their feet was not much more than a sullen glow, as though the earth itself was burning from within, but it had cooked their food and warmed their feet. Some of their food—lacking a pot, they ate the cabbage raw, despite Quinn's dire predictions of unparalleled flatulence.

"It's nay as though there's anyone to hear, is there?" Jamie said, nibbling gingerly at a thick, waxy leaf. It squeaked between his teeth like a live mouse and was bitter as he imagined wormwood and gall to be, but it helped to kill his hunger. He'd eaten worse than raw cabbage, often.

Tom scrabbled a half dozen blackened knobs out of the embers and speared one with Lord John's dagger. It hadn't left his person since his employer had entrusted him with the knife upon his arrest.

"It's a bit hard in the middle," he said, gingerly poking at the potato. "But I don't know as more roasting would help it any."

"Nay bother," Jamie assured him. "I've got all my teeth, and none of them loose." Lacking a dirk, he stabbed two of the measly things neatly with his rapier and waved them gently in the air to cool.

"Show-away," said Quinn, but without rancor. The Irishman had sulked on their way back to collect Tom but seemed to have recovered his spirits since, despite the fact

that the rain he had predicted was now falling. He'd been for finding supper and refuge for the night with a cottager, but Jamie had preferred to camp briefly, then go on as soon as they were rested. News of their presence would spread like butter on hot toast—his wame gurgled at thought of butter, but he sternly ignored it—and they could not afford to be picked up by a curious constable. There were enough people already who knew Lord John had had companions. Edward Twelvetrees, for one.

Did Twelvetrees know about Siverly yet? He wondered.

He tilted his head to spill the rain from the brim of his hat and blew on the hot potatoes.

Tom gathered the remaining potatoes in a fold of his cloak, deposited two in front of Quinn without remark, and came to sit down beside Jamie to eat his own share. Jamie hadn't yet told him about his plan—if his intentions could be dignified by such a word—let alone about Quinn's desire to abandon Grey, but was interested to see that Tom plainly didn't trust the Irishman.

Good lad, he thought.

Rain hissed and sputtered as it struck the fire. It wouldn't last much longer.

"How far is it to Athlone?" he asked, licking his fingers.

Quinn grimaced in thought. "From here? Maybe two hours."

Jamie felt, rather than saw, Tom perk up a bit at that, and turned his head to smile at the young valet.

"We'll get him back," he said, and was surprised at how gratified he was to see relief and trust flood Tom's round face.

"A-course we will," Tom said stoutly. "Sir," he added hastily. He didn't ask for details, which was just as well, Jamie thought.

"Sleep a bit," he said to Tom, when the fire showed signs of being finally extinguished. "I'll wake ye later, when it's time to go."

Quinn gave a small snort at this, but Jamie ignored it. Quinn knew fine that Jamie didn't trust him, and plainly Tom knew, too. It didn't need saying.

Jamie wrapped the borrowed cloak tighter round his body, wishing for a plaid and thick Highland stockings. The cloak was wool and would hold his heat, even if wet—but nothing shed water like the waulked wool of a Highland plaid. He sighed and found a place to sit where his arse wouldn't be in a puddle and there was a stone at his back to lean on.

His mind kept nagging at him, wanting to think, to make plans. But plans were pointless, until they reached Athlone and saw how things lay. As for thinking ... he needed to let matters rest and sort themselves. He was bone-tired, and knew it. He patted his breeches and found the pleasantly bumpy little bundle of his rosary. And there was the matter of his penance, after all.

The smooth wooden beads were a comfort to his fingers, as the repetition of the *Aves* was to his mind, and he felt his shoulders finally begin to relax, the counterpoint of the pattering rain on his hat and the distant gurgling of his wame a peaceful background to his prayers.

"It's not a crackbrained scheme."

"Eh?" Quinn had spoken so quietly that Jamie had only half-heard him, such was his state of mind.

"I said, it's not a crackbrained scheme." Quinn swiveled on his rock to look at Jamie directly, his eyes dark holes in his face. "The plan."

"Aye?" Jamie's brain was slow to focus on this. What plan? He thought dimly. "Perhaps I spoke too hasty, Quinn. I'll ask your pardon."

Quinn's attitude changed at once from hostility to forgiveness; he straightened and, with a glance at Tom curled in a sodden lump some distance away, got up and came to crouch beside Jamie.

"Not a bit of it, *mo chara*," he said, patting Jamie's shoulder. "I hadn't told ye the meat of it—doubtless it sounded fanciful."

Jamie made a sound meant to indicate cordial dismissal of this notion, privately wondering what in the name of God himself ... oh, Jesus.

"The cup?" he asked. "Because I told ye, when—"

"No," Quinn replied. "I mean, that's a part of it, sure, but what I hadn't told ye yet was how the invasion is to work."

"The invasion ..." Jamie's mind was coming hastily back from its peaceful bourne of prayer, and the knotting of his belly was not due to raw cabbage alone. "Ye'd mentioned raising an army. I recall that." And he recalled fine that Quinn had wanted him to raise it.

"Aye, but there's more." He saw Quinn's head turn as he looked over his shoulder, the picture of stealth. Then the Irishman leaned closer, close enough that Jamie could smell the man's sour breath. "The Irish Brigade," Quinn whispered in his ear.

"Aye?" He must have sounded as baffled as he felt, for Quinn gave a brief sigh of exasperation.

"Ye'll have heard of the Irish Brigade, at least?"

"I have, aye." He glanced at Tom, regretting that he hadn't let the lad take first watch; Quinn wouldn't be telling him this sort of thing. The Irishman's next words drove vain regrets from his mind, though.

"There are three regiments of the Irish Brigade in London," Quinn whispered, eyes alight with suppressed glee. "The officers of two of them are with us. When the word comes that all is in hand here in Ireland, they'll seize the king and hold Buckingham Palace!"

Jamie was struck dumb, and a good thing, too, for Quinn went on:

"We've loyal men in brigade regiments posted in Italy and France, too. Not all the officers—but once the thing is in motion, the rest will fall in. Or if they don't—" He lifted one shoulder, a fatalist's shrug.

"If they don't ... what?" Jamie knew what that shrug meant, but he wanted it spelled out, if only to give himself a moment's time to think. His scalp was prickling, and his wame had curled itself up into a quivering ball beneath his ribs.

Quinn pursed his lips. "Why, then ... those loyal to the Cause will take command, of course."

"Ye mean they'll kill those who don't go along with it."

"Now, then. Ye know as well as I do, ye can't make wine without squeezin'—"

"Don't bloody say it!" Jamie had the obscure feeling that cliché on top of treasonous insanity was more than anyone should be obliged to put up with. He rubbed a wet hand over his wet face, the bristles of his beard harsh under his palm.

"Each regiment has at least two volunteers among the officers. When the signal comes ..." But Quinn hadn't said "volunteers" in English, though he was speaking English. He'd used the Irish term, "Deonaigh."

In Jamie's experience, excluding clergy and peasants, Irishmen seemed to consist of two sorts: rabid fighters and maniac poets. These traits weren't often combined in the same man, though.

That word, "Deonach." It was in the Wild Hunt poem; he wouldn't have taken notice, save that there was a popular soldier's song, a sentimental, maudlin thing in Irish, called "The Volunteer." There'd been several Irishmen in the group of mercenaries with whom he'd fought in France, much given to singing it when in liquor. That was almost the last song he recalled, before the blow of an ax had severed him forever from music.

"Sé an fuil á lorgadh, is é a teas á lorgadh," he said abruptly, his heart beating quicker, and Quinn's face turned sharply toward him. They search out blood, they seek its heat.

A moment's silence, save for the rain. The fire was drowned now, even the black mark it left on the earth quite drowned in darkness. The cabbage was making its presence felt and Jamie clenched his buttocks, silently easing himself.

"Where did ye hear that, now?" Quinn said, his voice mild, and Jamie realized with a small shock that his life might depend upon his answer.

"Thomas Lally said it to me," he replied, his voice as mild as Quinn's. "When I met him in London." Quinn might know that he'd met Lally—and it was true that Lally had said those words to him, reading them from the written sheet, a puzzled expression on his face.

"He did?" Quinn sounded blank, perhaps a little frightened, and Jamie expelled his breath, only then realizing that he'd been holding it. So. Lally maybe wasn't part of the plot. But Quinn was fearful lest he knew about it?

"Tell me more about this, will ye?" Jamie said quickly. "Is there a date set for it?"

Quinn hesitated, still suspicious, but eagerness to talk and desire to win Jamie over got the better of him.

"Well, there is, then. All I can say is, it'll be a day when the streets will be crowded, the beer flowing from the taverns, the squares all hoaching like weevils in a sack of grain. All the regiments will parade down Pall Mall and then go off to barracks. One of the Irish Brigade regiments will come at the last of the procession, and instead of heading back to their quarters, they'll go round behind the palace. Once His Majesty's gone inside, they'll move into the grounds, overpower any guards at the back, and take the palace. The guards in the front will be taken up with the crowds and won't know a thing's afoot until it's too late—and then the second regiment sweeps in to secure the place. All the other regiments will be busy stripping off and putting away their tack—even if word comes as to what's happening, they'll never pull themselves together in time to stop it. And

once the king is in hand, messengers will go out to our supporters in Wales and Scotland, ready to march and take London entire!"

It might conceivably work. God knew, much madder schemes had.

"But they canna hold out for very long, even wi' the king's person to bargain with," Jamie pointed out. "What if there's some delay in Charles Stuart coming wi' the new army from Ireland?" *Some delay*, he thought, remembering all too well what it took to assemble even an ill-equipped rabble, let alone feed and transport them. And that was reckoning without the Bonnie Prince himself—a weak reed for a revolution to lean upon, and surely to God Quinn must know that much. Or was that what the conspiracy counted upon?

"We thought of that," Quinn said importantly, and Jamie wondered just who "we" were. Could he get Quinn to tell him names? "There are fallbacks. The regiments in London don't stir a step until they've heard the word."

"Oh, aye? And what word is that?"

Quinn grinned at him and shook his head.

"Never you mind that, laddie. It's a mark of the great trust I bear ye that I've told ye what I have—but 'tis more than my life's worth to say more just yet." He leaned back and a loud fart ripped the air beneath him, surprising him.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!"

Despite the recent hair-raising revelations, Jamie laughed. Tom stirred at the sound, and a popping noise like distant gunfire emerged from the mound of wet blankets. Quinn glanced at Jamie, eyebrow raised.

"Three's a lucky number, so it is."



John Grey had some experience of prisons but had never been a guest of one. As such establishments went, the cell to which he'd been shown was fairly reasonable: there was no one else in the tiny room, the slop bucket was empty and dry, and there was a small, barred window. The walls oozed damp—why not, everything else in Ireland did—but there were no puddles on the floor, and while there was neither bed nor pallet, there was a wadded blanket in one corner of the room. He was glad to see it; the cell was bloody cold and his clothes were damp, his linen clammy; the heavens had opened on them an hour before they reached Athlone.

He paced the dimensions of the cell: eight feet by ten. If he were to walk seven hundred lengths of the cell, that would be approximately a mile. He shook out the blanket, dislodging a dead cricket, two live moths, and the broken fragments of what had once been a cockroach. What the devil had eaten it? he wondered. Rats?

Suddenly very tired, he sat down on the floor and pulled the blanket round his shoulders, shivering. He'd had time to think, riding to Athlone. He thought he'd have quite a bit more now but didn't expect it to do him much good.

It was both good luck and bad that Sir Melchior was gone. Bad, as it meant that the sergeant of the garrison had locked Grey up, because the deputy justiciar had not yet arrived, and the sergeant refused to summon the magistrate from the town until the morning. Good, as Sir Melchior or his deputy would very likely have questioned Grey—rather awkward—and then either put him under guard or demanded his parole, either of which would have kept him from getting back to Siverly's house or making his own investigation into Siverly's death.

His main concern was for Edward Twelvetrees. There had been no sign of the man, and none of the servants had mentioned his being there. Had he been at Glastuig, he could not but have noticed the uproar and come out to inquire. Ergo, he wasn't there—presumably because he had fled in the wake of the murder.

It had to have been Twelvetrees that Grey had heard in precipitate flight from the summerhouse after the murder. And as the man plainly had not gone to the stable, he must have returned—however briefly—to the main house. Why?

Either to fetch away something, or because he was cool enough to have realized that open flight would be an admission of guilt. Or possibly both, Grey thought. It was a substantial chest; it would have taken two footmen to carry it. Twelvetrees couldn't merely have scooped it up and ridden off with it under his arm.

It had been nearly noon when Grey found Siverly's body. Had Twelvetrees ridden up to the property, left his horse, then crept up to the summerhouse and bashed in Siverly's head with what Grey recognized as an Iroquois war club—doubtless the weapon with which Siverly had attacked Jamie Fraser?

Or had Twelvetrees never come back at all? It was possible, Grey supposed, that Siverly had enemies—given his record, it would be strange if he did not. And his possession of an Iroquois war club argued some fear of his life, did it not? Though the man did collect things; his room showed the normal accretions of a military man.

He sighed, closed his eyes, and tried to find a comfortable position, resting his head on an outstretched elbow.

Bloody hell. He simply didn't know enough. But he did know that he had to get out of here, and he had to go back to Glastuig, as soon as possible. There was nothing he could do but wait for Jamie Fraser.



The sound of feet on the paving stones outside waked him. He blinked and squinted at the barred window, in an attempt to judge the time. The sky was overcast, but from the feel of things, he thought it was well past midnight—and the

footsteps he heard weren't those of the regular midnight guard, in any case. There were several men.

He was on his feet, shod, and buttoning his waistcoat before the key grated in the lock. The door swung open, revealing the sergeant of the guard, lantern in one hand and a look of apoplectic fury on his face. Behind him loomed Jamie Fraser.

"I see ye were expecting us." Fraser sounded mildly amused. "Have ye got something to quiet this gentleman's humors?" He prodded the sergeant, a small, rawboned man, in the back with a large horse pistol, sending him stumbling into the cell.

"You filthy cur!" the sergeant exclaimed, the aubergine hue of his face deepening in the lantern light. "Your soul to the devil, ye wicked Scotch dog! And you—" He turned toward Grey, only to be interrupted by Grey's handkerchief, balled up and stuffed into his mouth.

Tom Byrd darted into the cell, seized the blanket, and, with a huge grin at Grey, drew Grey's dagger from his own belt and efficiently ripped off several strips, these being used at once to secure the sergeant. Tom then thrust the dagger into his employer's hand, and with a hoarsely whispered "Good to see you looking well, me lord!" he darted out again, presumably to scout for wandering guards.

"Thank you, Mr. Fraser," Grey murmured, shrugging into his coat as he headed for the door in his turn. In truth, he hadn't expected rescue, had only half-hoped for it, and his chest filled with a breathless excitement.

Fraser handed Grey the lantern, then waved the pistol, ushering him out. With a cordial nod at the sergeant, he pulled the door softly to behind them and locked it. He took back the lantern then and turned to the left. Near the corner, he paused, considering which way to go.

"I shouldn't have addressed you by name," Grey said, low-voiced. "I'm sorry."

Fraser shrugged, eyes squinted against the gloom that cloaked the courtyard. It was not quite drizzling, but the slates gleamed dully with wet where the lantern light reached them.

"Nay bother. There're none sae many redheided Scotsmen o' my size abroad in County Roscommon. It wouldna take them long to learn my name—and they wouldna require one to shoot me, in any case. Come on, wee Byrd," he said under his breath, "where are ye?"

As though the remark had conjured him, a dim figure appeared suddenly on the far side of the old bailey, waving. They walked—at a normal pace, lantern swinging low at Fraser's side—to the archway where Tom was waiting, his round face pale with excitement.

"This way," he breathed, and directed them to a set of shallow stone steps leading up to the walkway lined with arrow slits. "There's another stair at the far end, as goes down to the river gate," he whispered to John as he passed. "I didn't see any guards, but I hear voices."

John nodded, taking hold of his dagger. He hoped, for assorted reasons, that they weren't going to have to fight their way out.

"Should you leave the lantern?" he whispered, climbing close behind Jamie. Jamie shook his head.

"Better not," he said. "I may need it." Jamie stepped out onto the walkway and strode at what Grey considered an agonizingly slow pace. Grey and Tom Byrd followed like goslings. As they approached the bend of the wall, Grey heard voices from somewhere below and half-halted, only to be prodded on by Tom.

"Go on, me lord! We daren't stop," he whispered.

Feeling desperately exposed, Grey matched his step to Fraser's slow stride. He glanced quickly down and saw an open doorway across the courtyard, light spilling from it. The guardroom, it must be; he glimpsed several soldiers and could tell from the sudden hush, followed by laughter, groans, and exclamations, that they were dicing.

Just let someone throw a double six, he prayed.

Around another bend, out of sight, and he breathed again, blood hammering in his ears. The dark below was silent, though he could still hear the guards behind them.

Fraser's plait hung down his back, unclubbed. It swung gently between his shoulder blades, a snakelet of gold light from the lantern vanishing up the smooth auburn strands into darkness. Suddenly Fraser stopped, and Grey nearly ran into him.

He heard the Scot draw a long, deep breath and saw him cross himself. Jamie turned toward Grey, bending to bring his mouth near Grey's ear.

"There's someone below, at the gate," he said very quietly, his breath warm on Grey's cheek. "We'll have to take him. Try not to kill him, aye?"

And with that, he threw the lantern into the courtyard. It landed with a loud clank and went out.

"Fumble-fingers," said a sarcastic voice from below. "That you, Ferguson? Drop something, didja?" A man came out from the niche at the foot of the stair; Grey saw him as a squat, thick shape against the dark stones. Fraser took in a great lungful of air, vaulted the low wall, and leapt feetfirst from the walkway, startling Grey so badly that he nearly followed inadvertently.

Fraser had struck the man a glancing blow in falling on him but enough to stop his wind for a moment; the two of them writhed on the stones, no more than gasps and grunts to mark their struggle. Grey rushed down the steps, heedless of the clatter.

"Tom, get the gate!" He rushed to the struggling figures and, seeing that the shorter man had momentarily got astride Fraser and was punching him vigorously in the head, picked his moment as well as he might in the dark and kicked the short figure with great force in the balls from behind.

The man rolled off Fraser with a horrible noise, and the Scot got to his knees, breathing like a grampus. Grey was already on his own knees, groping the guard's clothing for anything usable. The man had neither pistol nor shot but sported a sort of short sword, rather like a Roman gladius. Grey wondered at this unorthodox choice of weapon but took it anyway, pausing to administer a silencing kick in the belly before following Fraser into the niche.

Tom had got the gate unbolted. The Shannon lay just within bow shot, its sullen waters dark as pitch.

Fraser was limping badly; the fall hadn't done his bruised arse any good. He was also cursing roundly under his breath in *Gàidhlig*, by which Grey deduced the object of his wrath.

"Bloody hell," said Tom, moved either by excitement or example. "Where is he? He's not left us, has he?"

"If he has, he's a dead man," Fraser muttered briefly, and vanished into the dark, casting upstream. Grey deduced that "he" was likely Quinn and that Fraser had gone to find him.

"Are we waiting for a boat?" Grey asked Tom, keeping one eye on the bulk of the castle above them. They were no more than twenty yards from the wall, and every instinct urged him to leg it as fast as possible.

"Yes, me lord. Quinn said he could find a boat, and he was to meet us here at"—he glanced round, helpless—"well, at whatever time it was Mr. Fraser said. Which I think it's just now." He, too, glanced back at the castle, his face a pale splotch in the darkness. There was no light in the town nearby, not even a watchman's lantern in the streets.

Grey clutched the gladius in one hand, his dagger in the other—and precious little use either one would be to him if they were fired upon from the ramparts. Not much if the whole garrison suddenly poured out of the gate, eith—

"Hold these!" He shoved the weapons into Tom's startled hands and, crouching, moved fast along the riverbank, scrabbling his hands through the edge of the water, searching for an appropriate bit of flotsam. He stubbed toes and fingers, floundering in the dark, but found what he wanted: a chunk of wood—a shattered plank. He tugged it free of the mud and ran back to the river gate, where he thrust his prize beneath the edge of the door. It slid under easily; no good, he needed—

Tom, bless him, had divined his need and was just behind him, his arms full of rubbish, sticks, and stones. Grey rummaged feverishly through this pile of dripping rejecta and crammed as much as he could beneath the free end of the plank, driving the wad in with his foot. His toes were going to be as blue as Fraser's arse, he thought, giving his improvised door jam a final, vicious kick.

Final, because there was no time to do more. There were shouts coming from inside the castle. Seizing Tom by the arm, Grey ran up the bank in the direction Fraser had gone.

The ground was muddy and uneven, and they lurched and stumbled, gasping as they went. Grey's foot skidded in the mud, then shot suddenly downward, and he fell sideways with a tremendous splash; he'd stepped into a reedbed. Gasping, he surfaced on his back, waving arms and legs in a vain attempt to stand up and catch his breath at the same time.

"Me lord!" Tom splashed in after him, though more carefully, wading out knee-deep, the reeds creaking and rasping as he pushed his way through them.

There was a sudden rattle, like pebbles thrown against glass. Shots, Grey thought, and flung himself over in a heavy swash of awkward, sopping clothes, able at last to get a purchase and crawl toward shore on hands and knees.

Single shots now, an irregular *pop-pop!* Pop! Could they see Tom and him, or were they firing at random to make a show? He thought suddenly of the arrow slits, and his shoulders hunched instinctively. Tom got him by the arm

and hoisted him onto the shore like a harpooned turtle.

"Let's—" Tom said, and stopped suddenly, with a choked grunt of surprise.

"What—Tom!" Tom's knees were buckling. Grey caught him halfway down and eased him to the ground. "Where?" he said. "Where are you hit?" He'd heard that sound before: sheer astonishment—and, all too often, a man's final comment on life.

"Arm," Tom said, quite breathless but still more astonished than alarmed. "Something hit my arm. Like a hammer."

It was dark as the inside of a coal mine, but Grey could make out a black smudge on the left arm of Tom's coat. Spreading fast. He swore under his breath, scrabbled through the wet mass of his hair, and came away with a mangled ribbon between his fingers.

"Above the elbow? Below?" he asked rapidly, prodding the arm.

"Ow! Just there—ow!" A little above. He wrapped the ribbon round Tom's arm, regretting the loss of his handkerchief, and pulled it tight. It snapped.

A moment's panic, when the night blurred round him and the sound of shots hitting water sounded harmless, like the early drops of rain from a passing cloud. Then things clicked back into focus, and he found—to his vague surprise—that some part of his mind had kept on working; he was sitting on the ground, one shoe off, pulling the sopping stocking off his foot.

This, with the other balled up to use as a wad, made an admirable tourniquet.

"I shall have something to say to the coves at Jennings and Brown," Tom said, in a voice that quavered only a little. "That's where I bought that ribbon."

"You do that, Tom," Grey said, smiling in spite of himself as he shoved his bare feet back into wet shoes. His mind was working through the possibilities. If Tom was seriously hurt, then he needed care at once. And the only place to get it was the castle. If it was no more than a flesh wound, though ... "Do you think you can walk? Can you sit up?"

"Oh, yes, me ... ohhh ..." Tom, halfway up, suddenly sagged and subsided onto the ground. "Oh," he murmured. "Me head's not half spinnnn ..." His voice trailed off into silence. Grey felt frantically for a heartbeat, ripping Tom's shirt out of his breeches and rummaging up under it, feeling here and there on the cold, wet skin of his chest. He found one, thank God, and, with a gasp of relief, pulled his hand out of Tom's shirt and looked round.

The river gate was opening, in slow jerks as men hit it from behind, forcing loose his improvised jam. He could see the light of their lanterns, rimming the door in a fiery nimbus.

"Shit," he said, and, seizing Tom under the arms, waded back into the reeds, dragging his senseless valet.



The boat bobbed as Jamie shifted his weight, bringing his heart into his mouth.

"Be still, ye great galoot." Quinn's voice came from behind, just audible over the lapping of the water against the sides, and the water uneasily close to the top of the boat, if you asked Jamie. "Ye'll have us over, if ye don't give over your squirming, and you like a tiger in a sack. Are ye like to be sick again?"

"Dinna even mention it," Jamie said, and swallowed, closing his eyes. He'd tried convincing himself that if he couldn't see the water, his stomach would be oblivious, but he was morbidly aware that less than an inch of wood separated his cringing buttocks from the cold black water of the Shannon, and that wood leaking like a sieve. His feet were wet, and as for squirming, he was convinced that the

wicked wee boat was doing just that, even drifting down the current as they were.

"Should we not row?" he whispered back over his shoulder—having been warned that sound travels over water.

"We shall not," Quinn said decidedly. "It's a bloody flat calm, so it is, and if ye think I mean to go splashing past Castle Athlone, hallooing and cryin' out for your friends ... Hist!"

Jamie jerked his head round to see the bulk of the castle rise up on his right, black as hell against the drizzling sky. The intimation of hell was the more pronounced as he saw the river gate from which they had escaped now burst open, spilling red light and black, shouting figures capered, demonlike, on the bank of the river.

"Hail Mary, Mother of God ..." he whispered, and took firm hold of the edge of the boat to steady himself. Where were Grey and Tom Byrd? He shut his eyes tight to accustom them to dark and looked away from the castle before opening them again. But what he could see of the bank was featureless, dark blobs that might be boats or sea monsters bobbing near the shore, the black patches of what Quinn said were reedbeds like tar against the dull shimmer of the water. Nothing seemed to move. Nothing that looked like two men running, at least. And, by God, they *should* be running, he thought, with that lot after them.

For now the whole garrison was roused, and the shore near the castle was aglow with lanterns, their swinging lights shooting beams up and down the riverbank, the bawling of the sergeant—Jamie grinned despite the situation, recognizing the furious voice of the man he'd taken prisoner—echoing across the water.

A quiet splash made him turn his head. Quinn had put an oar in the water and was sculling, very gently, to slow their progress. The boat's head turned inward in a slow, meditative circle.

"What if they're not here?" Quinn said very quietly.

"They're here. I left them on the bank, just by the castle."

"They're not there now," Quinn observed, an edge to his voice, low as it was.

"They saw me go upstream. They'll have followed me. We'll need to turn round. They'll not have seen us, coming down so quiet."

He spoke with a great deal more confidence than he felt, but Quinn said no more than a muttered "God and Mary and Padraic be with us" before putting the other oar in the water and settling himself to it. The boat turned, the current hissing past its sides, and with as little splashing as could be managed, they began slowly to retrace their progress, Jamie leaning out as far as he dared to scan the shore.

Nothing. He caught a flicker of movement, but it disappeared between two sheds. A dog, likely—too small to be a man, let alone two.

Where would they go, with the soldiers about to erupt into the night? Into the town was the logical answer. The castle was surrounded by a labyrinth of narrow, winding streets.

"How far d'ye want to go?" Quinn grunted. He was breathing hard with the effort of rowing against the current.

"This is far enough. Turn round again," Jamie said abruptly. They were perhaps a furlong upstream of the castle; if Grey and the lad had been on the bank, they would have found them by now. They must have gone into the town, and the soldiers would doubtless be coming to that conclusion, too.

Jamie started praying again. How was he to find them in the town? He was as noticeable himself as either of the Englishmen. It would have to be Quinn searching the town, and he doubted that the Irishman would be enthused at the prospect.

Aye, well, he'd just have to—

A heavy clunk! struck the hull of the boat near his hand,

and he jerked with such violence that the little vessel rocked wildly. Quinn cursed and backed his oars.

"What in the name of the Holy Ghost did we hit?"

Clunk! Clunk! Clunk! The sound was repeated, a frenzied demand, and Jamie leaned over the side and nearly let out a skelloch at the sight that greeted him: a wild-eyed head like Medusa protruding from the water a few inches from his hand, snaky hair in all directions and teeth bared in a ferocious grimace. This startling figure held what looked to be a large bundle in one arm, a sort of sword in the other hand, and as Jamie gaped at it, openmouthed, the figure gritted its teeth and swung the weapon once more against the side of the boat with a peremptory clunk!

"Get us in!" said the figure. "I can't hold him much longer."



Opium Dreams

Grey huddled in a sodden heap in the bottom of the boat, dully aware of Fraser's back in front of him. The Scot's long arms stretched and pulled, shoulders bunching as he rowed steadily upstream, and the black bulk of the castle slowly, slowly diminished behind them. He heard peremptory shouts from the shore and Quinn, standing up in the boat, clinging to the mast and shouting back in Irish, but Grey was too dazed with cold and exhaustion to worry much about what he was saying.

"That'll hold 'em," Quinn muttered, sitting down on the tiny slatted seat behind Grey. He put a hand on Grey's shoulder to steady himself and leaned forward. "How are ye, boy?" Tom was curled next to Grey, his head on Grey's knee, shivering convulsively. They both were, in spite of the cloaks Quinn had hastily wrapped round them.

"F-f-fine," Tom said. His body was tight with pain; Grey could feel the bulge of Tom's cheek against his leg as Tom clenched his teeth, and he laid a hand on his valet's head, hoping to comfort him a little. He fumbled with his other hand under the cloak covering Tom, but his fingers were clumsy with cold, unable to deal with the makeshift tourniquet.

"We n-need to loosen the t-t-tourniquet," he managed, hating his awkward helplessness, the chattering of his own

teeth.

Quinn bent swiftly to help, his curls brushing Grey's face; the Irishman smelled of peat smoke, sweat, and sausage grease, a strangely comforting, warm aroma.

"Let me have a bit of a look, now," he said, his tone friendly, soothing. "Ah, there I have it, the sorrow and the woe! Now, ye'll be holding quite still, Mr. Byrd, and I'll just ..." His voice trailed off in absorption as he felt his way. Grey felt the warmth of Quinn's body, was soothed himself as much by the physical presences of Quinn and Fraser, close by, as by the knowledge of escape.

Tom was making small whimpering noises. Grey curled his fingers into his valet's tangled damp hair, rubbing a little behind the cold ear, as he would to distract a dog while a tick was removed.

"Ah, now," Quinn murmured, fingers working busily in the dark. "Almost there. Aye, that's got it."

Tom gave a great gasp and gulped air, and dug the fingers of his good hand hard into Grey's leg. Grey deduced that the tourniquet was now loosed, letting a rush of blood flow into the wounded arm, waking the numbed nerves. He knew exactly what that felt like and clasped his own free hand over Tom's, squeezing hard.

"Is the bleeding bad?" he asked quietly.

"Bad enough," Quinn replied absently, still feeling about beneath the cloak. "Not spurtin', though. A little bandage will do, with the blessing." He rose up, shaking his head a little, and reached into his coat, coming out with a familiar square black bottle.

"It's as well I brought the tonic, thinkin' Jamie might need it for the pukin'. Sovereign for what ails ye, the maker says, and I'm sure that includes gunshot wounds and cold." He handed the bottle to Grey. The smell was mildly alarming, but Grey hesitated no more than an instant before taking a modest gulp. He coughed. He coughed until his eyes streamed and his chest heaved, but there was an undeniable sense of warmth stealing through his center.

Quinn, meanwhile, had got down onto the boards in order to rewrap Tom's arm and was now holding the bottle for the young man to drink. Tom swallowed twice, stopped to cough explosively, and, wordless, gestured for Grey to take another turn.

Out of concern for Tom, Grey drank abstemiously, taking only a few more sips, but it was enough to make his head swim pleasantly. He'd stopped shivering, and a feeling of drowsy peace laid its hand upon him. By Grey's feet, Quinn put the final touches on a fresh bandage torn from his shirttail and, patting Grey on the shoulder, clambered back behind him.

In front, Jamie Fraser still bent to his oars but, hearing Quinn's movement, called back, "How are ye, wee Byrd?"

Tom's only answer was a gentle snore; he had fallen asleep in the midst of the bandaging. Quinn leaned forward to answer.

"Well enough for the moment. The ball's still in him, though. He'll need to be brought to a doctor, I'm thinking."

"Ye know one?" Fraser sounded skeptical.

"Aye, and so do you. We'll take him to the monks at Inchcleraun."

Fraser stiffened. He stopped rowing, turned, and gave Quinn a hard look, visible even by starlight.

"It's ten miles at least to Inchcleraun. I canna row that far!"

"Ye'll not need to, you ignorant jackeen. What d'ye think the sail's for?"

Grey tilted back his head. Sure enough, he thought, with a sort of muzzy interest, there was a sail. It was a small sail, but still.

"I was under the impression that the use of a sail required

wind," Fraser said, elaborately courteous. "There is none, if ye hadna noticed."

"And wind we shall have, my rosy-bearded friend." Quinn was beginning to sound like his old expansive self. "Come sunrise, the wind comes up off Lough Derg, and 'twill bear us on the very breath of dawn, as the Good Book says."

"How long is it 'til dawn?" Fraser sounded suspicious. Quinn sighed and clicked his tongue reprovingly.

"About four hours, O ye o' little faith. Row just that wee bit longer, will ye, and we'll be into the waters of Lough Ree. We can turn aside out o' the current and find a resting place until daylight."

Fraser made a low Scottish sound in his throat but turned back to his oars, and the slow heave against the Shannon's current resumed. Left to silence and the softly rhythmic slosh of the oars, Grey's head dropped and he gave himself over to dreams.

These were bizarre, as opium dreams so often were, and he half-woke from a vision of himself erotically enmeshed with a naked Quinn, this sufficiently vivid that he scrubbed at his mouth and spat to rid himself of the taste. The taste proved to be not of the Irishman but of the tonic he had drunk; a ginger-tasting belch rose up the back of Grey's nose and he subsided against the side of the boat, feeling unequal to the occasion.

He was enmeshed with Tom, he found. Byrd was lying close against him, breathing stertorously; his face was pressed against Grey's chest, his flushed cheek hot even through Grey's half-dry shirt. All motion had stopped, and they were alone in the boat.

It was still dark, but the cloud cover had thinned, and the faded look of the few visible stars told him that it was no more than an hour 'til dawn. He lay flat on the wet boards, fighting to keep his eyes open—and fighting not to recall any of the details of the recent dream.

So groggy was he that it hadn't occurred to him even to wonder where Fraser and Quinn had gone, until he heard their voices. They were near the boat, on land—well, of course they're on land, he thought vaguely, but his drugged mind furnished him with a surreptitious vision of the two of them sitting on clouds, arguing with each other as they drifted through a midnight sky spangled with the most beautiful stars.

"I said I wouldna do it, and that's flat!" Fraser's voice was low, intense.

"Ye'll turn your back on the men ye fought with, all the blood spilt for the Cause?"

"Aye, I will. And so would you, if ye'd half the sense of a day-old chick."

The words faded, and Grey's vision of Quinn melted into one of a red-eyed banty rooster, crowing in Irish and flapping its wings, darting pecks at Fraser's feet. Fraser seemed to be naked but was somewhat disguised by drifts of vapor from the cloud he was sitting on.

The vision melted slowly into a vaguely erotic twinning of Stephan von Namtzen with Percy Wainwright, which he watched in a pleasant state of ennui, until von Namtzen evolved into Gerald Siverly, the ghastly wound in his head not seeming to hamper his movements.

Loud moaning from Tom woke him, sweating and queasy, to find the little boat gliding under sail along the shore of a flat green island—Inchcleraun.

Feeling mildly disembodied, and with only the crudest notion how to walk, he staggered up the path behind Fraser and Quinn, who were hauling Tom Byrd along as gently as they could, making encouraging noises. The remnants of his dreams mingled with the mist through which they walked, and he remembered the words he had overheard. He wished very much that he knew how that particular conversation had ended.



Loyalty and Duty

Jamie was greeted with concerned welcome by the monks, who took Tom Byrd away at once to Brother Infirmarian. He left Quinn and Grey to be given food and went in to see Father Michael, disturbed in mind.

The abbot looked him over with fascination and offered him a seat and a glass of whiskey, both of which he accepted with deep gratitude.

"You do lead the most interesting life, Jamie dear," he said, having been given a brief explanation of recent events. "So you've come to seek sanctuary, is it? And your friends—these would be the two gentlemen you told me of before, I make no doubt?"

"They would, Father. As for sanctuary ..." He tried for a smile, though weariness weighed down even the muscles of his face. "If ye might see to the poor lad's arm, we'll be off as soon as he's fettled. I wouldna put ye in danger. And I think perhaps the deputy justiciar of Athlone might not respect your sanctuary, should he come to hear about Colonel Grey's presence."

"Do you think the colonel did in fact murder Major Siverly?" the abbot asked with interest.

"I'm sure he did not. I think the miscreant is a man called Edward Twelvetrees, who has—had, I mean—some associations with Siverly." "What sort of associations?"

Jamie lifted his hand in a vague gesture. His bruised right shoulder burned like fire when he moved it and ached down to the bone when he didn't. His arse wasn't in much better case after hours of rowing on a hard slat.

"I dinna ken exactly. Money, certainly—and maybe politics." He saw the abbot's white brows rise, green eyes grow more intent. Jamie smiled wearily.

"The man I brought with me—Tobias Quinn. It's him I told ye of, when I made my confession before."

"I remember," murmured the abbot. "But I could not, of course, make use of that information, given as it was under the seal."

Jamie's smile grew a little more genuine.

"Aye, Father. I ken that. So now I tell ye outside that seal that Toby Quinn has it in his heart to take up the destiny I laid aside. Will ye maybe speak to him about it? Pray with him?"

"I will indeed, *mo mhic*," Father Michael said, his face alight with wary interest. "And you say he knows about the *Cupán*?"

An unexpected shudder ran over Jamie from his crown to the base of his spine.

"He does," he said, a little tersely. "I leave that between you and him, Father. I should be pleased never to see or hear of it again."

The abbot considered him for a moment, then raised a hand.

"Go in peace, then, *mo mhic*," he said quietly. "And may God and Mary and Padraic go with you."



Jamie was sitting on a stone bench by the monastery's graveyard when Grey came to find him. Grey looked

exhausted, white-faced and disheveled, with an unfocused look in his eyes that Jamie recognized as the aftereffects of Quinn's tonic.

"Give ye dreams, did it?" he asked, not without sympathy. Grey nodded and sat down beside him.

"I don't want to tell you about them, and you don't want to know," he said. "Believe me."

Jamie thought both statements were likely true, and asked instead, "How's our wee Byrd, then?"

Grey looked a little better at this and went so far as to smile wanly.

"Brother Infirmarian's got the ball out. He says the wound is in the muscle, the bone's not broken, the boy has a little small fever but, with the blessing, all will be well in a day or two. When last seen, Tom was sitting up in bed eating porridge with milk and honey."

Jamie's wame gurgled loudly at thought of food. There were things to be discussed first, though.

"D'ye think it was worth it?" he asked, one brow raised.

"What?" Grey slumped a little, rubbing the itching bristle on his chin with the palm of his hand.

"Tom Byrd. He'll likely do fine, but ye ken well enough he might have been killed—and yourself, too. Or taken."

"And you and Quinn. Yes. We all might." He sat for a moment, watching a fuzzy green worm of some kind inching along the edge of the bench. "You mean you think I was a fool to ask you to get me out of Athlone."

"If I thought that, I wouldna have done it," Jamie said bluntly. "But I like to know why I'm riskin' my life when I do it."

"Fair enough." Grey put down a finger, trying to entice the worm to climb on it, but the creature, having prodded blindly at his fingertip, decided that it offered no edible prospects and, with a sudden jerk, dropped from the bench, dangling briefly from a silken tether before swinging out on

the wind and dropping away altogether into the grass.

"Edward Twelvetrees," he said. "I'm morally sure he killed Siverly."

"Why?"

"Why might he have done it, or why do I think he did?" Without waiting for Jamie's reply, Grey proceeded to answer both questions.

"Cui bono, to begin with," he said. "I think that there is or was some financial arrangement between the two men. I told you about the papers they were looking at when I went there the first time? I am no bookkeeper, but even I recognize pounds, shillings, and pence written down on a piece of paper. They were looking over accounts of some sort. And that very interesting chest was probably not filled with gooseberries.

"Now, Siverly had money—we know that—and was obviously involved in what looks very like a Jacobite conspiracy of some kind. It's possible that Twelvetrees was not involved in that—I can't say." He rubbed his face again, beginning to look more lively. "I have difficulty believing that he is, really; his family is ... well, they're hard-faced buggers to a man, but loyal to the bone, been soldiers for generations. I can't see him committing treason."

"So ye think that he might have discovered what Siverly was into—perhaps as a result of your visit—and killed him to prevent his carrying out the scheme? Whatever scheme it was?"

"Yes. That's the honorable theory. The dishonorable one is that, discovering that Siverly held all this money—presumably on behalf of the conspiracy—he might simply have decided to do away with Siverly and pocket the lot. But the point is ..." He spoke more slowly, choosing his words. "Whichever it was, if it had to do with money, then there may be proof of it in the papers that Siverly had."

Grey's hand had curled into a fist as he spoke, and he

struck it lightly on his knee, unconscious of the movement.

"I need to get into the house and get those papers. If there's any proof of Siverly's involvement in a political conspiracy, or Twelvetrees's relations with him, it must lie there."

Jamie had been wondering, during these last conjectures, whether to mention the Duchess of Pardloe's information regarding Twelvetrees and money. Apparently, she hadn't chosen to share it with her husband or her brother-in-law, and he wondered why not.

The answer to that presented itself almost immediately: her wicked old father. Andrew Rennie was undoubtedly the source of her information, and she likely didn't want Pardloe finding out that she still dabbled in intelligence work for the old man. He didn't blame her. At the same time, the situation now seemed more serious than whatever marital strife the revelation might cause, if it got back to the duke.

"I don't suppose you're any more anxious to see him fight another duel than I am." The duchess's words came back to him. Ah, he'd forgotten that. It wasn't only her father she was concerned with; it was what might happen if Pardloe crossed swords—either figuratively or literally—with Edward Twelvetrees.

Aye, well—he might be able to save her confidence, even while sharing the information.

"There's a thing ye ought to know," Jamie said abruptly. "For some time, Twelvetrees has been moving large quantities of money to Ireland. *To* Ireland," he emphasized. "I didna ken where it was going—nor did the person who told me—but what d'ye think the odds are that it was going to Siverly?"

Grey's face went almost comically blank. Then he pursed his lips and breathed in slowly, thinking.

"Well," he said at last. "That does alter the probabilities. If that's true, and if it means that Twelvetrees was involved in the conspiracy, then it may be a case of plotters falling out—or ..." A second thought brightened his face; clearly he didn't like the notion of Twelvetrees being a traitor, which Jamie thought very interesting. "Or he was misled in what the money was to be used for and, discovering the truth, decided to put Siverly out of commission before he could put anything into action. I suppose your source didn't tell you exactly what this particular conspiracy had in mind to accomplish?" He shot Jamie a sharp look.

"No," Jamie said, with absolute truth. "But I suppose ye're right about the need to see the papers, if ye can. What makes ye think Twelvetrees hasn't already got them?"

Grey took a deep breath and blew it out, shaking his head.

"He might. But it was only yesterday—God, was it only yesterday?—that Siverly was killed. Twelvetrees wasn't staying in the house; the butler told me. The servants will be in a great taking, and Siverly does—did—have a wife, who presumably inherits the place. The constable said he was sealing the house until the coroner could come; I can't see the butler just letting Twelvetrees march in, open the chest, and make off with everything in it.

"Besides," he glanced toward the stone cottage where Tom Byrd lay, "I'd thought that once you got me out, we'd go straight back to Glastuig, and I'd almost certainly be there before Twelvetrees could worm his way in. But things happen, don't they?"

"They do," Jamie agreed, with a certain grimness.

They sat for a moment in silence, each alone with his thoughts. At last Grey stretched and sat up straight.

"The other thing about Siverly's papers," he said, looking Jamie in the eye, "and why I must have them, is that whatever they do or don't say about Twelvetrees, they're very likely to reveal the names of other men involved in the conspiracy. The members of the Wild Hunt, if you will."

This aspect of the matter had not escaped Jamie, but he

could hardly contradict Grey's conclusion, no matter how much he hated it. He nodded, wordless. Grey sat for a minute longer, then stood up with an air of decision.

"I'll go and speak to the abbot, thank him, and make provision for Tom to stay until we come back for him. Do you think Mr. Quinn will see us ashore?"

"I expect he will."

"Good." Grey started toward the main building, but then stopped and turned round. "You asked me if I thought it was worth it. I don't know. But it is my duty, regardless."

Jamie sat watching as Grey walked away, and an instant before he reached the door of the building, the Englishman stopped dead, hand already stretched out for the latch.

"He's just thought that he didna ask me whether I'd go with him," Jamie murmured. For with Siverly's death, Jamie's word to Pardloe was kept and his own obligation in the matter technically ended. Any further assistance Grey might need would be asked—or offered—as one man to another.

Grey stood fixed for a long moment, then shook his head as though annoyed by a fly and went inside. Jamie didn't think the gesture meant that Grey had dismissed the issue; only that he had decided to do his business with Father Michael before mentioning it to Jamie.

And what will I tell him?

The questions of Siverly's death or Twelvetrees's possible guilt mattered not a whit to him. The possibility of exposure of the Jacobite conspirators, though ...

"Ye've thought it all out once already," he muttered to himself, impatient. "Why can ye not leave it alone?"

I, James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser, do swear, and as I shall answer to God at the great day of judgment, I have not, nor shall have, in my possession any gun, sword, pistol, or arm whatsoever, and never use tartan, plaid, or any part of the Highland garb; and if I do so, may I be cursed in my undertakings,

family, and property. May I never see my wife and children, father, mother, or relations. May I be killed in battle as a coward and lie without Christian burial in a strange land, far from the graves of my forefathers and kindred; may all this come across me if I break my oath.

The words of the oath they'd made him speak when they spared his life had burned his lips when he spoke them; they burned his heart now. He likely knew none of the Wild Hunt personally—but that didn't make betrayal of those men any the lighter a burden.

But. The memory of a tiny skull with long brown hair lying under a gorse bush came to his mind as vividly as the memory of that foul oath—and weighed heavier. To leave these Irish lunatics to their business—or to keep Grey from stopping them, which amounted to the same thing—was to betray wee Mairi, or Beathag, or Cairistiona, and all those like them.

Well, then, he thought calmly. That is my duty. And I think the price is not too high.

He should eat, but he lacked the will to get up and go inside. He took the rosary from his pocket instead, but didn't begin any of the mysteries, merely held it in his hand for comfort. He twisted round on the bench, turning his back on the silent dead, letting the tiredness flow out of him as the living peace of the place settled on him.

The small bell rang from the church, marking the hour of Nones; he saw the lay brothers in the garden lay down their hoes and shake the dirt from their sandals, ready to go in.

And he saw a boy of fourteen or so, his head neatly tonsured, fresh and white as a mushroom, come round the shattered wall, looking from side to side. The boy saw Jamie and his face lighted with satisfaction.

"Mr. Fraser you'll be," he said, and held out a piece of paper. "Mr. Quinn asked me would I be handing this to you." He thrust it into Jamie's hand and was hurrying back toward

the chapel before Jamie could thank him.

He knew what it was: Quinn's farewell. So he'd gone, then—to use the cup. John Grey would have to find another ferryman. Ironic, considering where he'd just decided his duty lay—but he had promised Quinn to speak to the abbot and would just have to leave the matter now to God and hope the Almighty shared his view of the situation.

He nearly threw the note away, but some obscure impulse of civility made him open it. He glanced cursorily at it, then stiffened.

It was neither addressed nor signed.

You've a great loyalty to your friends, and God himself will surely bless you for it on the last day. But I should be less than a friend myself, did I not tell you the truth.

It was the Englishman who did for Major Siverly. I saw him with my own eyes, as I was watching from the wood behind the summerhouse.

Captain Twelvetrees is a great friend to our cause, and with Major Siverly dead, the means lie now in his hand. I urge you to protect him and give him what help you can when you return to London.

God willing, we will meet there and, with our other friends, see the green branch burst into flower.

By reflex, he crumpled the note in his hand. John Grey had come out of the abbot's office, pausing there to turn and say something to Brother Ambrose.

"Friends!" he said aloud. "God help me." He grimaced and, putting the rosary back in his pocket, tore the note to tiny pieces, which he scattered to the wind.



Amplexus

Jamie refused to allow Grey to try to hire horses, on grounds that the Irish liked gossip as much as did Highlanders, and were Grey to be seen in his uniform, the castle would know it by noon of the following day.

So they walked through the night from Lough Ree, keeping to the fields in the crepuscule, resting in the woods during light of day—when Jamie went into Ballybonaggin for food—then coming out onto the roads again at dark, where they kept up a fine pace, lighted by a sympathetic moon that rose above them huge, pale, and mottled as a ball of gleaming alabaster.

The countryside was empty of people—and anything else.

They had passed from open meadows into a wooded area, and the trees clustered thick and dark, roots intruding into the road, branches overhanging, so that they walked through pools of darkness, the road invisible beneath their feet, emerging suddenly into clearer spots where the trees drew back a little, and the moon caught the sudden white flash of face or shirtfront, the glint of a sword hilt.

Even the shuffle of their feet was lost in the murmur of the woods, a fresh wind rising, rattling the new leaves. John felt the night as something wild creeping upon him, the force of spring itself rising from the ground into his feet, his legs, bursting through his body 'til the blood throbbed in his

fingers, pulsed in his chest.

Perhaps it was freedom, the exhilaration of their escape. Perhaps the excitement of a hunt by night, adventure and danger before them. Or the knowledge that he was an outlaw—with pursuit and danger certainly behind him.

The road was narrow, and they jostled against each other now and then, blinded between the dark wood and the brilliance of the rising moon. He could hear Jamie's breath, or thought he could—it seemed part of the soft wind that touched his face. He could smell Jamie, smell the musk of his body, the dried sweat and dust in his clothes, and felt suddenly wolflike and feral, longing changed to outright hunger.

He wanted.

Master me, he thought, breathing deep, or shall I your master be?

There were frogs in the ditches, in the bogs that lay beyond the scrim of trees. They called, high and low, shrill and bass, cascading over one another in a vast, pulsating chorus. At a distance, sitting on a lawn with that chorus as background, watching the stars come out, the sound might be no more than a pastoral, the song of spring.

This close, it was still the song of spring, but that song was revealed to be what the pagans had always known it to be—the blind urge to seize, to mate, to spill blood and seed heedlessly into the earth, wallow in crushed flowers, writhe in the juices of grass and mud.

Those bloody frogs were *shrieking* their passion, raw-throated and triumphant. Hundreds of them. The racket was deafening.

Distracted by the vision of amphibians in their thousands locked in slime-wrapped sexual congress amid the dark waters, he caught his foot in a root and fell heavily.

Fraser, close beside, felt him go and grabbed him, catching him round the middle and jerking him upright again.

"Are ye all right?" he asked, low-voiced, his breath warm on Grey's cheek.

"Croakle dum-ho," he said, breathless and dazed. Fraser's hands were still tight on his arms, steadying him.

"What?"

"Great Lord Frog to Lady Mouse. It's a song. I'll sing it to you later."

Fraser made a sound in his throat that might have been either derision or amusement—maybe both—and let go Grey's arms. He swayed, almost staggering, and put out a hand to steady himself. He touched Fraser's chest, warm and solid through his clothes, swallowed hard, and took his hand away.

"This seems the sort of night on which one might meet the Wild Hunt itself," Grey said, starting to walk again. His skin prickled and jumped, and he would not in fact have been surprised in the slightest to see the Queen of Faerie come riding out of the wood, fair and spectral as the sailing moon, terrible in her hunting, her pack of attendants all young men, lithe and sharp-toothed, hungry as wolves. "What are they hunting, do you suppose?"

"Men," Fraser said without hesitation. "Souls. I was thinking the same myself. Though ye see them more on a storm-tossed night."

"Have you actually seen them?" He believed for an instant that it was quite possible, and put the question in all seriousness. Rather to Grey's surprise, Fraser took it the same way.

"No," he said, but in a tone verging on doubt. "At least—that is—"

"Tell me."

They walked in silence for a few moments, but he could feel Fraser gathering his thoughts and kept silent himself, waiting, feeling the shifting rhythms of the bigger man's body as he moved, soft-footed, on the uneven ground. "Years back," Fraser said at last. "It was after Culloden. I lived on my own land then, but hidden. In a wee cavern in the rocks. I'd come out at night, though, to hunt. And sometimes I'd have need to go far afield, if the hunting was poor, and often it was."

They had emerged momentarily into a spot where the trees fell away, and the light of the moon shone bright enough for Grey to see Fraser tilt his head back, as though considering the orb.

"It wasna a night like this, really," he said. "Nay moon at all, and the wind going through your bones and moaning like a thousand lost souls in your ears. But it—it was wild, ye might say. Wild in the way this is," he added, dropping his voice a little and gesturing briefly at the dark countryside surrounding them. "A night when ye might expect to meet wi' things, should ye venture out."

He spoke quite matter-of-factly, as though it were entirely commonplace to meet with "things." On a night like this, Grey could believe that completely and wondered suddenly how many nights the other had spent roaming alone beneath blazing stars or a clouded vault, with no touch on his skin save the wind's rough caress.

"I'd run down a deer and killed it," Fraser said, also as though this was commonplace. "And I'd sat down by the carcass to catch my breath before the gralloching—that's the cutting out o' the bowels, ken. I'd slit the throat, of course, to bleed the meat, but I hadna yet said the prayer for it—I wondered later if it was maybe that that called them."

Grey wondered whether "that" referred to the hot scent of the pumping blood or the lack of a sanctifying word, but didn't want to risk stopping the story by asking.

"Them?" he said after a moment, encouraging.

Fraser's shoulders moved in a shrug. "Perhaps," he said. "Only all of a sudden, I felt afraid. Nay—worse than afraid. A terrible fear came upon me, and then I heard it. *Then* I

heard it," he repeated, for emphasis. "I was afraid before I heard it—them."

What he had heard was the sound of hooves and voices, half-swallowed by the moaning wind.

"Was it some years before, I should ha' thought it was the Watch," he said. "But there wasna any such thing after Culloden. My next thought was that it was English soldiers—but I couldna hear any words in English, and usually I'd hear them easily at a distance. English sounds different, ken, than the *Gàidhlig*, even when ye dinna make out the words."

"I would suppose it does," Grey murmured.

"The other thing," Fraser went on, as though Grey hadn't spoken, "was that I couldna tell which direction the sound came from. And I should have. The wind was strong but steady, from the northwest. And yet the sounds came sometimes out o' the wind but just as often from the south or the east. And then they would disappear, and then come back."

By this time he had been standing, hovering near the body of the slain deer, wondering whether to run and, if so, which way?

"And then I heard a woman scream. She ... ah." Fraser's voice sounded a little odd, suddenly careful. Why? Grey wondered. "It ... wasna a scream of fear, or even anger. It ... ehm ... well, it was the way a woman will scream, sometimes, if she's ... pleased."

"In bed, you mean." It wasn't a question. "So do men. Sometimes."

You idiot! Of all the things you might have said ...

He would have berated himself further for having brought back the echo of his unfortunate remark in the stable at Helwater, that injudicious—that criminally stupid remark—

But Fraser merely made a deep "mmphm" sound in his throat, seeming to acknowledge Grey's present remark at face value. "I thought for an instant, perhaps, rape ... but there were nay English soldiers in the district—"

"Scots do not commit rapine?" Annoyance with himself sharpened Grey's tone.

"Not often," Fraser said briefly. "Not Highlanders. But as I say, it didna sound like that. And then I heard other noises—screeching and skellochs, and the screaming of horses, aye, but not the noise of battle. More like folk who are roaring drunk—and the horses, too. And it was coming closer to me."

It was the notion of drunken horses that at this point had put the vision of the Wild Hunt into Jamie's mind. It was not a common tale of the Highlands, but he had heard such stories. And heard more, from other mercenaries, when he'd fought in France as a young man.

"The queen, they said, rides a great white horse, white as moonlight," he said quietly. "Shining in the dark."

Jamie had spent enough time on the moors and in the high crags to know how much lay hidden in the land, how many ghosts and spirits lingered there, how much unknown to man—and the thought of supernatural creatures was not foreign to him at all. Once the thought of the Wild Hunt had come to him, he spared not a moment in leaving the deer's carcass, as fast as he could go.

"I thought they smelled the blood, ken," he explained. "I'd not said the rightful prayer to bless it. They'd think it was their lawful prey."

The matter-of-fact tone of this statement made the small hairs prickle on John's nape.

"I see," he said, rather faintly. He saw all too well, in his mind's eye: a helter-skelter rush of the unearthly, horses' coats and faerie faces glowing with a spectral light, spilling down out of the dark, screaming like the wind, howling for blood. The shrieking of the lust-crazed frogs now struck him differently; he heard the blind hunger in it.

"Sidhe," Fraser said softly. Sheee, the word sounded like, to Grey; much like the sigh of the wind.

"It's the same word, in the *Gàidhlig* and the *Gaeilge*. It means the creatures of the other world. But sometimes when they come forth out o' the stony duns where they live—they dinna go back alone."

He had run for a nearby burn, out of some half-heard, half-recollected notion that the *sidhe* could not cross running water, thrown himself over a high bank, and crouched among the boulders at its foot, staggering against the force of water that surged to mid-thigh, half-drowned in the spray, blind in the dark but keeping his eyes tight shut nonetheless.

"Ye dinna want to look upon them," he said. "If ye do, they can call ye to them. Cast their glamour upon you. And then ye're lost."

"Do they kill people?"

Fraser shook his head.

"They take people," he corrected. "Lure them. Take them back into the rocks, down to their ain world. Sometimes"—he cleared his throat—"sometimes, the stolen ones come back. But they come back two hundred years later. And all—all they knew and loved—are dead."

"How terrible," John said quietly. He could hear Fraser's breathing, heavy, like a man struggling against tears, and wondered why this aspect of the tale should move him so.

Fraser cleared his throat again, explosively.

"Aye, well," he said, voice steady once more. "So I spent the rest o' the night in the burn and nearly froze to death. If it hadna been near dawn when I went in, I shouldna have come out again. I could barely move when I did, and had to wait for the sun to rise high enough to warm me, before I could make my way back to where I'd left my deer."

"Was it still there?" Grey asked with interest. "As you'd left it?"

"Most of it was. Something—someone," he corrected

himself, "had gralloched it neat as a tailor's seam and taken away the head and the entrails and one of the haunches."

"The huntsman's share," Grey murmured under his breath, but Fraser heard him.

"Aye."

"And were there tracks around it? Other than your own, I mean."

"There were not," Fraser said, the words clipped and precise. And he would know, Grey thought. Anyone who could hunt a deer like that could certainly discern the traces. Despite Grey's attempt at logic, a brief shiver went over him, visualizing the headless carcass, clean and butchered, the blood-soaked ground left trackless in the mist of dawn, save for the deep-gouged prints of the fleeing deer and the man who had felled it.

"Did you—take the rest?"

Fraser raised one shoulder and let it fall.

"I couldna leave it," he said simply. "I had a family to feed."

They walked on then in silence, each alone with his thoughts.



The moon had begun to sink before they reached Glastuig, and exertion had calmed Grey's rush of spirits somewhat. These revived abruptly, though, when they found the gate shut but not locked and, passing through, saw a glimmer of light on the distant lawn. It was coming from one of the windows on the right.

"Do you know which room that is?" he murmured to Jamie, nodding toward the lighted window.

"Aye, it's the library," Fraser replied, equally low-voiced. "What do ye want to do?"

Grey took a deep breath, considering. Then touched

Jamie's elbow, inclining his head toward the house.

"We'll go in. Come with me."

They approached the house cautiously, skirting the lawn and keeping to the shrubberies, but there was no sign of any servants or watchmen being on the premises. At one point, Fraser lifted his head and sniffed the air, taking two or three deep breaths before gesturing toward an outbuilding and whispering, "The stable is that way. The horses are gone."

Jamie's cautious researches had indicated as much; word in the village was that all the servants had left, unwilling to remain in a house where murder had been done. The livestock would have been taken away to the village, too, Grey supposed.

Could this nocturnal visitor be the executor? Grey could think of no reason why a legitimate executor of the estate would need to make a surreptitious visit—but then, perhaps the man had come in daylight, as was proper, but then lingered at his work? He glanced up at the moon; it was past midnight. Surely that argued more dedication to duty than he was accustomed to find among lawyers. Perhaps the man was just staying in the house and, finding himself wakeful, had come down in search of a book, Grey thought with a mental shrug. Occam's razor worked more often than not.

They were within pistol shot of the house now. Grey glanced to and fro, and then, feeling self-consciously dramatic, stepped out onto the lawn. It was lit like a stage, and his shadow puddled dark at his feet, the bright moon almost overhead. No dog barked, no voice called out demanding to know his purpose, but still he walked gingerly, footfalls soundless on the untidy lawn.

The casements were well above eye level. Well above his eye level, at least. With some irritation, he saw that Fraser, who had come silently out behind him, was able by standing on his toes to see into the house. The big Scot shifted to and fro, craning to see—and then froze. He said something out

loud, in bloody Gaelic. Grey thought from the tone and the clearly visible expression on his face that it must be a curse.

"What do you see?" he hissed, plucking impatiently at Fraser's sleeve. The Scot thumped down on his heels and stared down at him.

"It's that wee arse-wipe, Twelvetrees," he said. "He's going through Siverly's papers."

Grey barely heard the second part of this; he was already headed for the front door and quite ready to break it down, should it offer him the least resistance.

It didn't. It was unlocked, and he heaved it open with such force that it crashed into the wall of the foyer. The sound coincided with a startled yelp from the library, and Grey charged toward the open door through which light was streaming, barely aware of Fraser, at his heels, saying urgently, "I'm no going to break ye out of that bloody castle again, just you remember that!"

There was a louder yelp as he burst into the library to find Edward Twelvetrees crouched beside the mantelpiece, the poker clutched in both hands and poised like a cricket bat.

"Put that down, you bloody nit," Grey said, halting just short of striking range. "What the devil are you doing here?"

Twelvetrees straightened up, his expression going from alarm to outrage.

"What the devil are *you* doing here, you infamous fiend?" Fraser laughed, and both Grey and Twelvetrees glared at him.

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen," he said mildly, though his broad face still bore a look of amusement. He waved his fingers, in the manner of one urging a small child to go and say hello to an aged relative. "Be going on wi' your business. Dinna mind me."

Jamie looked around, picked up a small wing chair that Grey had knocked over in his precipitous entry, and sat in it, leaning back with an air of pleased expectation. Twelvetrees glared back and forth between Grey and Fraser, but an air of uncertainty had entered his expression. He looked like a rat baffled of its cheese rind, and Grey suppressed an urge to laugh, too, despite his anger.

"I repeat," he said more mildly, "what are you doing here?"

Twelvetrees laid down his weapon but didn't alter his attitude of hostility.

"And I repeat—what are *you* doing here? How dare you enter the house of the man you have so foully murdered!?"

Grey blinked. For the last little while, taken up by the magic of the moonlit night, he had quite forgotten that he was an outlaw.

"I didn't murder Major Siverly," he said. "I should very much like to know who did, though. Was it you?"

Twelvetrees's mouth dropped open. "You ... cur!" he said, and, seizing the poker up, made to brain Grey with it.

Grey caught his wrist with both hands and managed to pull him off balance as he lunged, so that Twelvetrees lurched and staggered, but he kept his feet sufficiently as to elbow Grey in the face with his free arm.

Eyes watering, Grey dodged a reckless swipe with the poker, leapt backward, and caught his bootheel in the edge of a rug. He staggered in his turn, and Twelvetrees, with a triumphant grunt, swung the poker at his midsection.

It was a glancing blow but knocked the wind out of him briefly, and he doubled over and sat down hard on the floor. Unable to breathe, he rolled to the side, avoiding another blow that clanged off the slates of the hearth, and, seizing Twelvetrees by the ankle, jerked as hard as he could. The other man went over backward with a whoop and the poker flew through the air, crashing into one of the casement windows.

Twelvetrees appeared to have stunned himself momentarily, having knocked his head against the battered mantelpiece. He lay sprawled on the hearth, his outflung hand dangerously close to the unshielded fire. With a relieving gasp, Grey rediscovered how to breathe, and lay still, doing it. He felt the vibration of a large body through the floorboards and, wiping a sleeve across his streaming face—God damn it, the bastard had bloodied his nose; he hoped it wasn't broken—saw Fraser reach down delicately and haul Twelvetrees clear of the fire. Then, frowning, Fraser rose swiftly and, grabbing the ash shovel, scraped a smoking mass of papers out of the hearth, scattering them hastily over the floor, seizing chunks that had not yet quite caught fire, and separating them from the baulk of burning pages. He ripped off his coat and flung it over the half-charred papers to smother the sparks.

Twelvetrees uttered a strangled protest, reaching for the papers, but Fraser hauled him to his feet and deposited him with some force on a settee upholstered in blue- and white-striped silk. He glanced back at Grey, as though inquiring whether he required some similar service.

Grey shook his head and, wheezing gently, one hand to his bruised ribs, got awkwardly to his feet and hobbled to the wing chair.

"You could ... have helped," he said to Fraser.

"Ye managed brawly on your own," Fraser assured him gravely, and to his mortification, Grey found that this word of praise gratified him exceedingly. He coughed and wiped his nose gingerly on his sleeve, leaving a long streak of blood.

Twelvetrees groaned and raised his head, looking dazed.

"I'll ... take that ... as a no,... shall I?" Grey managed. "You say you did *not* kill Major Siverly?"

"No," Twelvetrees answered, looking rather blank. Then his wits returned and his eyes focused on Grey with a profound expression of dislike.

"No," he repeated, more sharply. "Of course I did not kill

Gerald Siverly. What kind of flapdoodle is that?"

Grey thought briefly of inquiring whether there was more than one sort of flapdoodle and, if so, what the categories might be, but thought better of it and ignored the question as rhetorical. Before he could formulate another question, he noticed that Fraser was calmly engaged in going through the piles of paper on the desk.

"Put those down!" Twelvetrees barked, staggering to his feet. "Stop that at once!"

Fraser glanced up at him and raised one thick red brow.

"How d'ye mean to stop me?"

Twelvetrees slapped at his waist, as do men who are accustomed to wearing a sword. Then sat down, very slowly, reason returning.

"You have no right to examine these papers," he said to Grey, calmly by comparison with his earlier outbursts. "You are a murderer and evidently an escaped outlaw—for I misdoubt that you have been released officially?"

Grey understood this was intended as sarcasm and didn't bother replying. "By what right were you examining them, may I ask?"

"By right of law," Twelvetrees replied promptly. "I am the executor of Gerald Siverly's will, charged with the discharge of his debts and the disposition of his property."

So put that in your pipe and smoke it, his expression added. Grey was in fact taken aback at this revelation.

"Gerald Siverly was my friend," Twelvetrees added, and his lips compressed briefly. "A particular friend."

Grey had known that much, from Harry Quarry, but it hadn't occurred to him that Twelvetrees would be so intimate with Siverly as to have been appointed executor of his estate. Had Siverly no family, bar his wife?

And if Twelvetrees was so intimate—what did he know concerning Siverly's actions?

Whatever it was, he obviously wasn't about to confide his

knowledge to Grey. John got to his feet and, manfully trying not to wheeze in the smoke-filled air, went to the bay window and threw back the lid of the blanket chest. The ironbound box was gone.

"What have you done with the money?" he demanded, swinging back to Twelvetrees. The man glared at him with profound dislike.

"So sorry," he sneered. "It's where you'll never get your thieving hands on it."

Jamie was collecting the half-charred bits of paper he had saved from the fire, handling each with ginger care, but looked up at this, glancing from Twelvetrees to Grey.

"D'ye want me to search the house?"

Grey's eyes were on Twelvetrees, and he saw the man's nostrils flare, his lips compress in disgust—but there was no hint of agitation or fear in his red-rimmed eyes.

"No," Jamie said, echoing Grey's thoughts. "He's right; he's carried it away already."

"You're quite good at this business of outlawry," Grey said dryly.

"Aye, well. I've had practice." The Scot had a small collection of singed papers in his hand. He carefully pulled one free and handed it to Grey.

"I think this is the only one that might be of interest, my lord."

It was written in a different hand, but Grey recognized the sheet at once. It was the Wild Hunt poem—and he did wonder where the devil the rest of it was; why only this one page?—much singed and smeared with ash.

"Why—" he began, but then, seeing Fraser jerk his chin upward, turned the paper over. He heard Twelvetrees's breath hiss in, but paid no attention.

The Wild Hunt

Capt. Ronald Dougan

Wm. Scarry Spender
Robert Wilson Bishop
Fordham O'Toole
Èamonn Ó Chriadha
Patrick Bannion Laverty

Grey whistled softly through his teeth. He knew none of the names on the list but had a good idea what it was—an idea reinforced by the look of fury on Twelvetrees's face. He wouldn't go back to Hal *quite* empty-handed.

If he wasn't mistaken, what he held in his hand was a list of conspirators, almost certainly Irish Jacobites. Someone—had it been Fraser or himself?—had suggested that the Wild Hunt poem was a recognition signal, and he had wondered at the time, a signal for whom? Here was the answer—or part of one. Men who did not know one another personally would recognize others in their group by the showing of the poem—on its face a bit of half-finished, innocuous verse, but in reality a code, readable by those who held the key.

Fraser nodded casually toward Twelvetrees. "Is there anything ye want me to beat out of him?"

Twelvetrees's eyes sprang wide. Grey wanted to laugh, in spite of everything, but didn't.

"The temptation is considerable," he said. "But I doubt the experiment would prove productive. Just keep him there, if you would, while I have a quick look round."

He could tell from Twelvetrees's dour expression that there was nothing further to be found in the house, but, for form's sake, he went through the desk and the bookshelves and made a brief foray upstairs with a candlestick, in case Siverly should have kept anything secret in his bedchamber.

He felt a strong sense of oppression, walking through the empty darkness of the house, and something akin to sadness, standing in the dead man's chamber. The servants had stripped the bed, rolled up the mattress, and tidily covered

the furniture in dust sheets. Only the moving gleam of candlelight from the damask wallpaper gave a hint of life.

He felt curiously empty, as though he himself might be a ghost, viewing the remnants of his own life without emotion. The heat and excitement of his confrontation with Twelvetrees had quite drained away, leaving a sense of flatness in its wake. There was nothing further he could do here; he could not arrest Twelvetrees or compel answers from him. Whatever might yet be discovered, the end of the matter was that Siverly was dead, and his crimes with him.

"And his place shall know him no more," he said softly, and the words fell and vanished among the silent shapes of the sleeping furniture. He turned and left, leaving the door open on darkness.

SECTION IV



A Tithe to Hell



The Wild Hunt

They straggled into London on the late mail unwashed, unshaven, and smelling strongly of vomit. The channel crossing had again been rough, and even Grey had been sick.

"If you can hold on to your stomach when all about you are losing theirs ..." he muttered, thinking that this would be a good line for a poem. He must remember to tell Harry; perhaps he could think of a decent rhyme. "Boozing lairs" was the only thing that came to his own mind, and the thought of boozing kens, dark cellars full of drunken, sweating, cohabiting humanity, combined with the reek of his companions and the coach's jolting, made him queasy again.

The thought of explaining things to Hal made him queasier still, but there was no help for it.

They reached Argus House near sunset, and Minnie, hearing the noise of their arrival, came hurrying down the stairs to greet them. A quick, appalled glance at them having told her all she wanted to know, she forbade them to speak, rang for footmen and chambermaids, and ordered brandy and baths all round.

"Hal ...?" Grey asked, glancing warily toward the library.

"He's in the House, making a speech about tin mining. I'll send a note to bring him back." She took a step away,

holding her nose with one hand and gesturing him toward the stairs with the other. "Shoo, John."



Clean and still relatively sober, despite a lavish application of brandy, Grey made his way down to the larger drawing room, where his nose told him tea was being served. He heard the soft rumble of Jamie Fraser's voice, talking to Minnie, and found them cozily ensconced on the blue settee; they looked up at his entrance with the slightly startled air of conspirators.

He had no time to wonder about this before Hal arrived, dressed for the House of Lords and flushed from the heat of the day. The duke collapsed into a chair with a groan and pried his red-heeled shoes off, dropping them into Nasonby's hands with a sigh of relief. The butler bore them off as though they were made of fine china, leaving Hal to examine a hole in his stocking.

"The press of carriages and wagons was so great, I got out and walked," he said, as though he'd last seen his brother at breakfast, rather than weeks before. He glanced up at Grey. "I've got a blister on my heel the size of a pigeon's egg, and it looks better than you do. What the devil's happened?"

With this introduction, it proved easier than Grey had thought to lay things out. This he did as succinctly as possible, referring to Fraser now and then to provide details.

Hal's lips twitched a bit at the part about Siverly's attack upon Jamie Fraser, but he sobered immediately upon hearing of Grey's two visits to Siverly's estate.

"Good God, John." Tea had now appeared, and he absently took a slice of fruitcake, which he held uneaten in one hand while stirring sugar into his tea. "So you escaped from Athlone Castle and fled Ireland, suspected of murder. You do realize that the justiciar will recognize you from your description?"

"I hadn't time to worry about it," Grey retorted, "and I don't plan to start now. We have more important things to think of."

Hal leaned forward and set down the fruitcake, very carefully.

"Tell me," he said.

Grey obliged, bringing out the half-charred pages they had retrieved from Twelvetrees's bonfire. Finally, he deposited the smudged and crumpled sheet of poetry, with the list of names on the back, and explained what he thought these signified.

Hal picked it up, whistled between his teeth, and said something scabrous in German.

"Nicely put," said Grey. His throat was raw from seasickness and talking. He took up his cup of tea and inhaled it thankfully. "I see one man on that list who holds a commission; if any of the others are in the army, it should be possible to locate them fairly easily."

Hal put the singed pages carefully on the table.

"Well. I think it behooves us to proceed carefully, but quickly. I'll put Harry on to these names; he knows everyone and can find out who they are, if they're in the army, and what their history may be. Plainly most *are* Irish; I think we ought to have a very cautious look at the Irish Brigades—don't want to offend them unduly. As for Twelvetrees ..." He noticed the fruitcake, picked it up, and took a bite, chewing absently as he thought.

"He already knows he's under suspicion of something," Grey pointed out, "whether he knows what or not. Do we approach him directly or just follow him about London to see who he talks to?"

Hal's face lighted in a smile, as he looked his younger brother up and down.

"You going to black your face and follow him yourself? Or

did you have in mind setting Mr. Fraser on him? Neither of you is what I'd call inconspicuous."

"No, I thought I'd let you do it," Grey said. He reached for the brandy decanter and poured some into his teacup. He was so tired that his hand shook, splashing a little into the saucer.

"I'll talk to Mr. Beasley," Hal said thoughtfully. "I believe he knows where those O'Higgins rascals are; they might be of use."

"They are Irish," Grey pointed out. The O'Higgins brother, Rafe and Mick, were soldiers—when it suited them. When it didn't, they disappeared like will-o'-the-wisps. They did, however, know everyone in the Rookery, that raucous, uncivilized bit of London where the Irish émigrés congregated. And if there was a job to be done involving things that weren't strictly legal, the O'Higginses were your men.

"Being Irish doesn't necessarily imply treasonous proclivities," Hal said reprovingly. "They were certainly helpful with regard to Bernard Adams."

"All right." Grey leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, feeling fatigue flow through his body like sand through an hourglass. "On your head be it."

Minnie cleared her throat. She'd been sitting quietly, stitching something, while the men conversed.

"What about Major Siverly?" she asked.

Grey opened his eyes, regarding her blearily.

"He's dead," he said. "Were you not listening, Minerva?"

She gave him a cold look. "And doubtless he deserved it. But did you not begin this hegira with the intent of bringing him to justice and making him account publicly for his crimes?"

"Can you court-martial a dead man?"

She cleared her throat again and looked pleased.

"Actually," she said, "I rather think you can."

Hal stopped chewing fruitcake.

"I collected any number of records of general courts-martial, you know," she said, with a quick glance at Grey. "When ... when poor Percy ..." She coughed, and looked away. "But the point is, you can have a posthumous court-martial. A man's deeds live after him and all that, apparently—though I think it's mostly intended to provide a record of truly stunning peccability, for the edification of the troops and to enable the wicked officer's superiors to indicate that they weren't actually asleep or conniving while all the dirty dealings were going on."

"I've never heard of such a thing," Grey said. From the corner of his eye, he could see Jamie Fraser examining a crumpet as though he'd never seen one before, lips tight. Jamie Fraser was the only person in the world—besides Percy—who knew the truth of Grey's relationship with his stepbrother.

"How often has it been done?" Hal asked, fascinated.

"Well, once that I know about," Minnie admitted. "But once is enough, isn't it?"

Hal pursed his lips and nodded, eyes narrowed as he envisioned the possibilities. It would have to be a general court-martial, rather than a regimental one; they'd known that to begin with. Siverly's regiment might wish to prefer charges against him, given the scale of his crimes, but the records of a regimental court-martial were not public, whereas those of a general court-martial necessarily were, involving the judge advocate's office and its tediously detailed records.

"And it does give you a public arena, should you want one," Minnie added delicately, "in which to explore Major Siverly's relations with Edward Twelvetrees. Or anyone else you like." She nodded at the singed paper lying next to the teapot.

Hal began to laugh. It was a low, joyous sound, and one

Grey hadn't heard in some time.

"Minnie, my dear," he said affectionately. "You are a pearl of great price."

"Well, yes," she said modestly. "I am. Captain Fraser, would you care for more tea?"



Thomas, Comte de Lally, Baron de Tollendal, was lodged in a small private house near Spitalfields. So much Jamie had discovered from the duchess, who didn't ask him why he required the information; nor did he ask her why she wanted to know whether he had spoken with Edward Twelvetrees and, if so, whether Twelvetrees had mentioned the name Raphael Wattiswade.

He wondered briefly who Wattiswade was but made no inquiries of Grey or Pardloe; if the duchess respected his confidence, he would respect hers. He had asked her whether she had heard of Tobias Quinn; she had not.

He wasn't surprised at that; if Quinn was in London—and knowing what he knew about Quinn's plans, he was almost sure of it—he would be keeping himself quiet. Still, he might be using the Druid cup as inspiration to those followers whose dedication was not quite sure—and if he had the cup and had been showing the dreadful thing about, there might well be rumors of it.

He walked through the narrow streets, feeling the alien strangeness of the city. Once, he had had men he knew—both those he commanded and those who sought him out—and networks of information. Once, he could have put out word and found a man like Quinn within hours.

Once.

He put the thought firmly away from him; that part of his life was over. He had made up his mind to it and did not mean to turn back; why did such thoughts still come to him? "Because ye've still to finish it, clot-heid," he muttered to himself. He had to find Quinn. Whether it was to put a stop to the Irish Brigades' plot before it became action, dooming those involved in it, or for the sake of Quinn himself, he wasn't sure—but he must find the man. And Thomas Lally was still a man such as he had been himself. Lally was also a prisoner, true, but one still with followers, informants, one who listened and planned. A man who would leave the stage of war only when carried off it feetfirst. A man who hasn't given up, he thought, with a tinge of bitterness.

He'd come unannounced. It wasn't courteous, but he wasn't interested in courtesy. He needed information and had a better chance of getting it if Lally hadn't time to decide whether it was wise to give it to him.

The sun was high by the time he arrived; Pardloe had invited him to make use of the Greys' coach, but he didn't want anyone knowing his destination and so had walked halfway across London. They weren't bothering to follow him anymore; they were much too busy looking for the members of the Wild Hunt. How long might he have before one of those names led them to someone who would talk? He knocked at the door.

"Captain Fraser." It was Lally himself who answered the door, to Jamie's surprise. Lally was surprised, too, but cordial—he stepped back, gesturing Jamie inside.

"I am alone," Jamie said, seeing Lally peer down the street before closing the door.

"So am I," said Lally, casting a bleak look round the tiny front room. It was disordered, with smeared crockery and crumbs on the table, a cold, unswept hearth, and a general feel of neglect. "My servant has left, I'm afraid. Can I offer you ..." He swung round, eyeing a shelf that held two or three bottles, picked one up and shook it, looking relieved when it sloshed. "A glass of ale?"

"Aye, thank ye." He knew better than to refuse hospitality,

particularly under such circumstances, and they sat down at the table—there was no place else to sit—pushing aside the dirty dishes, green cheese rinds, and a dead cockroach. Jamie wondered if the thing had died of starvation or poisoning.

"So," said Lally, after a minimal exchange of commonplaces, "did you find your Wild Hunt?"

"The English think they have," Jamie said. "Though it may be naught but a mare's nest."

Lally's eyes widened in interest, but he was still reserved.

"I heard that you went to Ireland with Lord John Grey," he remarked, and sighed a little. "I haven't seen it in many years. Is it still green, then, and beautiful?"

"Wet as a bath sponge and mud to the knees, but, aye, it was green enough."

That made Lally laugh; Jamie thought he didn't laugh often. It didn't come easily to him.

"It's true that I was obliged to go wi' his lordship," Jamie said, "but I had another companion, as well—one less official. D'ye recall Tobias Quinn, by chance?"

Indeed he did; Jamie saw the knowledge flicker deep in Lally's eyes, though his face stayed calm, slightly quizzical.

"From the Rising. One of the Irish who came with O'Sullivan, was he not?"

"Aye, that'll be the man. He met us in Ireland and traveled with us, in the guise of a traveler met by accident."

"Indeed." Lally sipped ale—it was flat and stale, and he made a face and threw it out the open window. "What was his purpose?"

"He told me he sought a thing—the *Cupán Druid riogh*, he called it. Ye've heard of it?"

Lally was not a good natural liar.

"No," he said, but his hands curled on the tabletop and he stiffened a little. "A Druid king's cup? What on earth is that?"

"Ye've seen it, then," Jamie said, friendly but firm. Lally stiffened further, torn between denial and answer. So he had seen it. Which in turn meant that he'd seen Quinn, for surely Quinn would surrender it to no man save Charles Stuart.

"I need to speak with him," Jamie said, leaning forward to indicate sincerity and urgency—neither one feigned. "It is a matter of his own safety, as well as that of the men with whom he's involved. Can ye get word to him? I shall meet him anywhere he likes."

Lally sat back a bit, suspicion darkening his eyes.

"Meet him and betray him to the English?" he said.

"Ye believe that of me?" Oddly, the idea that Lally might believe it hurt him.

Lally grimaced and looked down.

"I don't know," he said, low-voiced, and Jamie saw how drawn he was, the muscles of his face hard under the skin. "So many men I thought I knew ..." He gave a small, despairing shake of the head. "I don't know whom to trust—or whether there is anyone who can be trusted, anymore."

That, at least, held the ring of truth.

"Aye," said Jamie quietly. "I, too." He spread his hands out, flat on the table. "And yet I have come to you."

And yet ... He could almost hear Lally thinking. Furious things were going on behind that pale, twitching face.

Ye're in it up to your eyebrows, poor wee fool, he thought, not unkindly. Add one more to the tally, then; one more man who might go to his doom if this harebrained scheme came to the point of action. One more who might be saved, if ...

He pushed his chair back from the table and stood up.

"Hear me, a Tomás MacGerealt," he said formally. "Quinn will maybe have told ye what he said to me, and I to him. If not, ask him. I said it not from cowardice, not from treachery, nor unwillingness to stand wi' friends and comrades. I said it from sure knowledge. Ye kent my wife?"

"The Sassenach woman?" The ghost of a smile touched

Lally's mouth, sardonic.

"La Dame Blanche, they called her in Paris, and for good reason. She saw the end of the Cause—and its death. Believe me, Thomas. This venture, too, is doomed, and I ken that fine. I wouldna have it take ye down wi' it. For the sake of our shared past, I beg ye—stand clear."

He hesitated, waiting for an answer, but Lally kept his eyes on the table, one finger circling in a puddle of spilled ale. At last, he spoke.

"If the English do not send me back to France to clear my name, what is there for me here?"

There was no answer to that. Lally lived at the sufferance of his captors, as Jamie did. How would a true man not be tempted by the possibility of regaining his life? Jamie sighed, helpless, and Lally glanced up, his gaze sharpening as he perceived pity on Jamie's face.

"Ah, don't worry about me, old comrade," he said, and there was as much affection as irony in his voice. "The Marquise of Pelham comes back from her country house next week. She has a *tendresse* for me, La Marquise—she will not let me starve."



Particular Friends

Harold, Duke of Pardloe, Colonel of the 46th Foot, visited the Judge Advocate's office, attended by both his regimental colonels and by his brother, Lieutenant Colonel Lord John Grey, to file the necessary documents to call a posthumous general court-martial of one Major Gerald Siverly, on a variety of charges ranging from theft and corruption, to failure to suppress mutiny, to willful murder—and treason.

After hours of discussion, they had decided to proceed with the court-martial at once and to add the charge of treason. It would cause talk—an immense amount of talk—and perhaps bring more of Siverly's connections to the surface. Meanwhile, those men they had managed to identify from Siverly's list of the Wild Hunt—a half dozen or so—would be carefully watched, to see whether news of the court-martial might cause them to run, to act, or to seek out others in the plot.

Even with the documents filed, it would be nearly a month before the court-martial was convened. Unable to bear the inactivity of waiting, Grey invited Jamie Fraser to go with him to a race meeting at Newmarket. Returning two days later, they stopped at the Beefsteak, where they took rooms, intending to dine and change before going on to a play in the evening.

By unspoken mutual consent, they had avoided any

reference to Ireland, Siverly, Twelvetrees, court-martials, or poetry. Fraser was quiet, occasionally withdrawn—but he relaxed in the presence of horses, and Grey felt a small relaxation of his own tension in seeing it. He had arranged for Jamie's parole at Helwater because of the horses and the relative degree of freedom, and while he could not deceive himself that Jamie was content as a prisoner, at least he had some hope that he was not completely unhappy.

Am I right to treat him thus? he wondered, watching Fraser's broad back as the Scot preceded him from the dining room. Will it give him something to remember, to recollect with pleasure when he goes back—or only increase the bitterness of his position? God, I wish I knew.

But then ... there was the possibility of freedom. He felt his stomach knot at the thought but wasn't sure whether it was from fear that Fraser would gain his freedom—or that he wouldn't. Hal had certainly mentioned it as a possibility, but if there proved to be a fresh Jacobite plot, the country would be swept up once more in fear and hysteria; it would be nearly impossible to have Fraser pardoned in such circumstances.

He was so caught up in these reflections that it was some moments before he realized that he knew the voice coming from the billiards room to his right.

Edward Twelvetrees was at the green-baize table. He looked up from a successful shot, his face alight with pleasure, then caught a glimpse of Grey in the hallway, and his face went stiff, the smile freezing into a tooth-baring rictus. The friend with whom he'd been playing stared at him in astonishment, then turned a bewildered face toward Grey.

"Colonel Grey?" he said, tentative. It was Major Berkeley Tarleton, the father of Richard Tarleton, who had been Grey's ensign at Crefeld. He knew Grey, of course, but plainly could not understand the sudden hostility that had sprung up like a wall of thorns between the two men.

"Major Tarleton," Grey said, with a nod that did not take his eyes away from Twelvetrees. The tip of Twelvetrees's nose had gone white. He'd received his summons to the court-martial, then.

"You unspeakable whelp." Twelvetrees's voice was almost conversational.

Grey bowed.

"Your servant, sir," he said. He felt Jamie come up behind him and saw Twelvetrees's eyes narrow at sight of the Scot.

"And you." Twelvetrees shook his head, as though so appalled that he could find no speech to address the situation. He turned his gaze upon Grey again. "I wonder at it, sir. Indeed, I wonder at it. Who would bring such as this fellow, this depraved Scotch creature, a convicted traitor"—his voice rose a little on the word—"into the sacred precincts of this club?" He was still holding his cue, clutching it like a quarterstaff.

"Captain Fraser is my particular friend, sir," Grey said coldly.

Twelvetrees uttered a most unpleasant laugh.

"I daresay he is. A very *close* friend, I have heard." The edge of his lip lifted in a sneer.

"What do you imply, sir?" Fraser's voice came from behind him, calm, and so formal as almost to lack his usual accent. Twelvetrees's hot eyes left Grey, rising to Fraser's face.

"Why, sir, since you are so civil as to inquire, I *imply* that this arse-wipe is your"—he hesitated for an instant, and then said, elaborately sardonic—"not merely your most particular friend. For surely only the loyalty of a bedfellow can have led him to do your bidding."

Grey felt a ringing in his ears, like the aftereffects of cannon fire. He was dimly conscious of thoughts pinging off the inside of his skull like the shards of an exploding grenade, even as he shifted his weight: He's trying to goad you, does he want to provoke a fight—he'll bloody get one!—or

does he want a challenge, if so, why not give one? Because he wants to look the aggrieved party? He's just called me a sodomite in public, he means to discredit me, I'll have to kill him. This last thought arrived simultaneously with the flexing of his knees—and the grasp of Tarleton's fingers on his arm.

"Gentlemen!" Tarleton was shocked but firm. "Surely you cannot mean such things as your conversation might suggest. I say you should command your passions for the moment, go and have a cooling drink, take sober thought, perhaps sleep on the matter. I am sure that in the morning—"

Grey wrenched his arm free.

"You bloody murderer!" he said. "I'll—"

"You'll what? Fucking sodomite!" Twelvetrees's hands were clenched on the cue stick, his knuckles white.

A much bigger hand came down on Grey's shoulder and dragged him out of the way. Fraser stepped in front of him, reached across the corner of the table, and plucked the cue out of Twelvetrees's hands as though it were a broomstraw. He took it in his hands and, with a visible effort, broke it neatly in two and laid the pieces on the table.

"Do you call me traitor, sir?" he said politely to Twelvetrees. "I take no offense at this, for I stand convicted of that crime. But I say to you that you are a greater traitor still."

"You—what?" Twelvetrees looked mildly stunned.

"You speak of particular friends, sir. Your own most particular friend, Major Siverly, faces a posthumous court-martial for corruption and treason of a most heinous kind. And I say that you should be tried along with him, for you have been partner to his crimes—and if justice is served, doubtless you will be. And if the justice of the Almighty be served, you will then join him in hell. I pray it may be swift."

Tarleton made a small gobbling noise that Grey would have found funny in other circumstances.

Twelvetrees stood stock-still, beady eyes a-bulge, and then

his face convulsed and he leapt upon the table, launching himself from it at Jamie Fraser. Fraser dodged aside, and Twelvetrees struck him no more than a glancing blow, falling to the floor at Grey's feet.

He remained in a crumpled heap for a moment, panting heavily, then rose slowly to his feet. No one tried to assist him.

He stood up, slowly straightened his clothing, and then walked toward Fraser, who had withdrawn into the hall. He reached the Scotsman, looked up as though gauging the distance, then, drawing back his arm, slapped Fraser barehanded across the face with a sound like a pistol shot.

"Let your seconds call upon me, sir," he said, in a voice little more than a whisper.

The hall was full of men, emerged from smoking room, library, and dining room at the sound of raised voices. They parted like the waves of the Red Sea for Twelvetrees, who walked deliberately away, back ramrod-straight and eyes fixed straight ahead.

Major Tarleton, with some presence of mind, had fished a handkerchief out of his sleeve and handed it to Fraser, who was wiping his face with it, Twelvetrees's blow having been hard enough to make his eyes water and slightly bloody his nose.

"Sorry about that," Grey said to Tarleton. He could breathe again, though his muscles were jumping with the need to move. He put a hand on the edge of the billiards table, not to steady himself but merely to keep himself from flying out in some unsuitable way. He saw that Twelvetrees's bootheel had made a small tear in the baize of the table.

"I cannot imagine what—" Tarleton swallowed, looking deeply unhappy. "I cannot imagine what should have led the captain to speak in such a—to say such—" He flung out his hands in total helplessness.

Fraser had regained his self-possession—well, in justice,

Grey thought, he'd never lost it—and now handed Tarleton back his handkerchief, neatly folded.

"He spoke so in an effort to discredit Colonel Grey's testimony," he said quietly—but audibly enough to be heard by everyone in the hallway. "For what I said to him is the truth. He is a Jacobite traitor and deeply involved, both in Siverly's treason—and in his death."

"Oh," said Tarleton. He coughed and turned a helpless face on Grey, who shrugged apologetically. The witnesses out in the hallway—for he realized that this was what they were, what Fraser had intended them to be—had begun to whisper and buzz among themselves.

"Your servant, sir," Fraser said to Tarleton, and bowing politely he turned and went out. He didn't go toward the front door, as Twelvetrees had, but rather toward the stairway, which he ascended in apparent unawareness of the many eyes fixed on his broad back.

Tarleton coughed again. "I say, Colonel. Will you take a glass of brandy with me in the library?"

Grey closed his eyes for an instant, flooded with gratitude for Tarleton's support. "Thank you, Major," he said. "I could do with a drink. Possibly two."



In the end, they shared the bottle, Grey taking the lion's share. Various friends of Grey's joined them, tentatively at first, but then with more confidence, until there were more than a dozen men clustered round three tiny tables shoved together, the tables crowded with glasses, coffee dishes, bottles, decanters, plates of cake and sandwich crumbs, and crumpled napkins. The talk, at first carefully casual, swung round quickly to loudly expressed shock at Twelvetrees's effrontery, with a general consensus that the man must be mad. No word was said regarding Fraser's remarks.

Grey knew they did not think Twelvetrees mad, but as he was in no way prepared to discuss the matter himself, he merely shook his head and murmured a general bewildered agreement with this assessment.

Twelvetrees had his supporters, too, of course, but there were fewer of them, and they had retreated to a stronghold in the smoking room, from which a stream of uneasy but decidedly hostile murmuring flowed like the tobacco smoke that shielded them. Mr. Bodley's face was pinched as the steward set down a fresh tray of savories in the library. The Beefsteak was no stranger to controversy—no London club was—but the staff disliked the sort of argument that led to broken furniture.

What the devil made him do it? was the refrain that pulsed in Grey's temples, along with the brandy. He didn't mean Twelvetrees, though he wondered that, as well; he meant James Fraser. He wanted urgently to go find out but made himself sit until the bottle was empty and the conversation had turned to other things.

Only until they get outside, he thought. The news would spread like ink on white linen—and be just as impossible to eradicate. He stood up, wondering vaguely what he'd tell Hal, took his leave of Tarleton and the remaining company, and walked—very steadily, concentrating—up the stairs to the bedrooms.

The door to Fraser's room stood open, and a male servant—the Beefsteak employed no chambermaids—knelt on the hearth, sweeping out the ashes. The room was otherwise empty.

"Where is Mr. Fraser?" he asked, putting a hand on the doorjamb and looking carefully from corner to corner of the room, lest he might have overlooked a large Scotsman somewhere among the furnishings.

"'E's gone out, sir," said the servant, scrambling to his feet and bowing respectfully. "'E didn't say where." "Thank you," Grey said after a pause, and walked—a little less steadily—to his own room, where he carefully shut the door, lay on his bed, and fell asleep.



I called him a murderer.

That was the thought in his mind when he woke an hour later. I called him a murderer, he called me a sodomite ... and yet it's Fraser he called out. Why?

Because Fraser accused him, point-blank and publicly, of treason. He had to challenge that; he couldn't let the statement stand. An accusation of murder might be mere insult, but not an accusation of treason. And particularly not if there was any truth in it.

Of course. He'd known that, really. What he didn't know was what had possessed Fraser to make the accusation now, and in such a public manner.

He got up, used the pot, then splashed water from the ewer over his face and, tilting the pitcher, drank most of the rest. It was nearly evening; his room was growing dark, and he could smell the luscious scents of tea preparing downstairs: fried sardines, fresh buttered crumpets, lemon sponge, cucumber sandwiches, sliced ham. He swallowed, suddenly ravenous.

He was strongly tempted to go down and have his tea instantly, but there were things he wanted more than food. Clarity, for one.

He can't have done it for me. The thought carried some regret; he wished it were true. But he was realist enough to know that Fraser wouldn't have gone to such lengths merely to distract attention from Twelvetrees's accusation of sodomy, no matter what he personally thought of Grey at the moment—and Grey didn't even know that.

He realized that he was unlikely to divine Fraser's motives

without asking the man. And he was reasonably sure where Fraser had gone; there weren't many places he could go, in all justice.

Justice. There were a good many different ways to achieve that enigmatic state of affairs, in descending levels of social acceptability. Statute. Court-martial. Duello. Murder.

He sat down on the bed and thought for a few moments. Then he rang for paper and ink, wrote a brief note, folded it, and, without sealing it, gave it to the servant with instructions for its delivery.

He at once felt better, having taken action, and, smoothing his crumpled neckcloth, went in search of fried sardines.



Betrayal

Fraser had, as Grey thought, gone back to Argus House. When he arrived himself, Grey had barely ascertained as much from Nasonby when Hal came storming up the steps behind him, his tempestuous entrance nearly jerking the door from the butler's grasp.

"Where is that bloody Scotchman?" he demanded, dividing a glare between Grey and Nasonby.

That was fast, Grey thought. News of what had happened at the Beefsteak had clearly spread through the coffeehouses and clubs of London within hours.

"Here, Your Grace," said a deep, cold voice, and Jamie Fraser emerged from the library, Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* in his hand. "Did you wish to speak with me?"

Grey had a moment's relief that Fraser had finished the collected disputations of Marcus Tullius Cicero; Burke would make much less of a dent in Hal's skull if it came to blows—which looked likely at the moment.

"Yes, I bloody wish to speak with you! Come in here! You, too!" He turned to glower at Grey, including him in this command, then swept past Fraser into the library.

Jamie walked across the room and sat down deliberately, looking coolly at Hal. The door had barely closed behind them when Hal swung round to face Fraser, face livid with

shock and fury.

"What have you done?" Hal was making an effort to control himself, but his right hand was flexing, closing and unclosing, as though he were keeping himself with an effort from hitting something. "You knew what I—what we"—he corrected himself, with a brief nod at Grey—"intended. We have done you the honor of including you in all our counsels, and this is how you repay—"

He stopped abruptly, because Fraser had risen to his feet. Fast. He took a quick step toward Hal, and Hal, by pure reflex, took a step back. His face was flushed now, but his color was nothing to Fraser's.

"Honor," Fraser said, and his voice shook with fury. "You dare speak to me of honor?"

"I—"

A large fist crashed down on the table, and all the ornaments rattled. The bud vase fell over.

"Be still! Ye seize a man who is your captive—and your captive by honor alone, sir, for believe me, if I had none, I should have been in France these four years past! Seize and compel him by threat to do your bidding, and by that bidding to betray ancient comrades, to forswear vows, betray friendship and loyalty, to become your very creature ... and ye think ye do me *honor* to count me an Englishman!?"

The air seemed to shiver with the force of his words. No one spoke for a long moment, and there was no sound save the drip of water from the fallen vase, dropping from the edge of the table.

"Why, then?" Grey said quietly, at last.

Fraser rounded on him, dangerous—and beautiful—as a red stag at bay, and Grey felt his heart seize in his chest.

Fraser's own chest heaved visibly, as he sought to control his emotions.

"Why," he repeated, and it was not a question, but the preface to a statement. He closed his eyes for an instant, then opened them, fixing them on Grey with great intensity.

"Because what I said of Twelvetrees is true. With Siverly dead, he holds the finances of the rising in his hands. He must not be allowed to act. *Must* not."

"The rising?" Hal had subsided into his chair as Fraser spoke but now sprang to his feet. "There is a rising, then? You know this for a fact?"

Fraser spared him a single glance of contempt.

"I know it." And in a few words, he laid the plan before them: Quinn's acquisition of the Druid king's cup, the involvement of the Irish regiments, and the Wild Hunt's plan. His voice shook with some strong emotion at moments in the telling; Grey could not tell whether it was rage at them or fear at the enormity of what he said. Perhaps it was sorrow.

He seemed to have stopped speaking, letting his head fall forward. But then he drew a deep, trembling breath and looked up again.

"If I thought that there was the slightest chance of success," he said, "I should ha' kept my own counsel. But there is not, and I know it. I canna let it happen again."

Grey heard the desolation in his voice and glanced briefly at Hal. Did his brother know the enormity of what Fraser had just done? He doubted it, though Hal's face was intent, his eyes live as coals.

"A minute," Hal said abruptly, and left the room. Grey heard him in the hall, urgently summoning the footmen, sending them at once for Harry Quarry and the other senior officers of the regiment. Calling for his secretary.

"A note to the prime minister, Andrews," Hal's voice floated back from the hallway, tense. "Ask if I may wait upon him this evening. A matter of the greatest importance."

A murmur from Andrews, a great rush of exodus, then a silence, and Hal's footsteps on the stairs.

"He's gone to tell Minnie," Grey said aloud, listening. Fraser sat by the hearth, elbow on his knee and his head sunk upon one hand. He didn't answer or move.

After a few moments, Grey cleared his throat.

"Dinna speak to me," Fraser said softly. "Not now."



They sat in silence for half an hour by the carriage clock on the mantelpiece, which chimed the quarter in a small silver voice. The only interruption was the entrance of the butler, coming in first to light the candles, and then again, bringing a note for Grey. He opened this, read it briefly, and thrust it into his waistcoat pocket, hearing Hal's footsteps on the stair, coming down.

His brother was pale when he came in and clearly excited, though plainly in command of himself.

"Claret and biscuits, please, Nasonby," he said to the butler, and waited 'til the man had left before speaking further. Fraser had risen to his feet when Hal came in—not out of respect, Grey thought, but only to be ready for whatever bloody thing was coming next.

Hal folded his hands behind him and essayed a small smile, meant to be cordial.

"As you point out, Mr. Fraser, you are not an Englishman," Hal said. Fraser gave him a blank stare, and the smile died aborning. Hal pressed his lips together, breathed in through his nose, and went on.

"You are, however, a paroled prisoner of war, and my responsibility. I must reluctantly forbid you to fight Twelvetrees. Much as I agree that the man needs killing," he added.

"Forbid me," Fraser said, in a neutral tone. He stood looking at Hal as he might have examined something found on the bottom of his shoe, with a mix of curiosity and disgust.

"You cause me to betray my friends," Jamie said, as

reasonably as one might lay out a geometric proof, "to betray my nation, my king, and myself—and now you suppose that you will deprive me of my honor as a man? I think not, sir."

And, without another word, he strode out of the library, brushing past a surprised Nasonby, coming in with the refreshments. The butler, nobly concealing any response to current goings-on—he had worked for the family for some time, after all—set down his tray and retired.

"That went well," said Grey. "Minnie's advice?" His brother gave him a look of measured dislike.

"I didn't need Minnie to tell me the sort of trouble that will happen if this duel takes place."

"You could stop him," Grey observed, and poured claret into one of the crystal cups, the wine dark red and fragrant.

Hal snorted.

"Could I? Yes, possibly—if I wanted to lock him up. Nothing else would work." He noticed the fallen bud vase and absently righted it, picking up the small daisy it had held. "He has the choice of weapon." Hal frowned. "Sword, do you think? It's surer than a pistol if you truly mean to kill someone."

Grey made no reply to this; Hal had killed Nathaniel Twelvetrees with a pistol; he himself had killed Edwin Nicholls with a pistol much more recently—though, granted, it had been sheer accident. Nonetheless, Hal was technically right. Pistols were prone to misfire, and very few were accurate at distances beyond a few feet.

"I don't know how he is with a sword," Hal went on, frowning, "but I've seen the way he moves, and he's got a six-inch reach on Twelvetrees, at least."

"To the best of my knowledge—which is reasonably good—he hasn't had any sort of weapon in his hands for the last seven or eight years. I don't doubt his reflexes"—a fleeting memory of Fraser's catching him as he fell on a dark Irish

road, the scream of frogs and toads in his ears—"but it's you who is constantly prating on at me about the necessity of practice, is it not?"

"I never prate," Hal said, offended. He twiddled the daisy's stem between his fingers, shedding white petals on the rug. "If I let him fight Twelvetrees and Twelvetrees kills him ... that would cause trouble for you, he being nominally under your protection as the officer in charge of his parole."

Grey felt a sudden clench in the belly. "I should not consider damage to my reputation the worst result arising from that situation," he said, imagining—all too well—Jamie Fraser dying in some bleak dawn, his pumping blood hot on Grey's guilty hands. He took a gulp of wine, not tasting it.

"Well, neither would I," Hal admitted, putting down the tattered stem. "I'd rather he wasn't killed. I like the man, stubborn and contentious as he is."

"To say nothing of the fact that he has rendered us a signal service," Grey said, with a noticeable edge to his voice. "Have you any notion what it cost him to tell us?"

Hal gave him a quick, hard look, but then glanced away and nodded.

"Yes, I have," he said quietly. "You know the oath of loyalty that they made the Jacobite prisoners swear—those who were allowed to live?"

"Of course I do," Grey muttered, rolling the cup restlessly between his palms. It had been his duty to administer that oath to incoming prisoners at Ardsmuir.

May I never see my wife and children, father, mother, or relations. May I be killed in battle as a coward and lie without Christian burial in a strange land, far from the graves of my forefathers and kindred ...

He could only thank God that Fraser had been in the prison already for some time when Grey was appointed governor. He hadn't had to hear Jamie speak that oath or see the look on his face when he did so.

"You're right," Hal said, sighing deeply and reaching for a biscuit. "We owe him. But if he should kill Twelvetrees—there's no chance of it stopping with a mere drawing of blood, I don't suppose? No, of course not." He began to pace to and fro slowly, nibbling the biscuit.

"If he kills Twelvetrees, there'll be the devil to pay and no pitch hot, as the sailors say. Reginald Twelvetrees won't rest until he's got Fraser imprisoned for life, if not hanged for murder. And we won't fare much better." He grimaced and brushed biscuit crumbs from his fingers, plainly reliving the scandal that had followed his duel with Nathaniel Twelvetrees, twenty years before. This one would be worse, much worse, with the Greys accused of failing to stop a prisoner under their control—and if they were not openly accused of using Fraser as a pawn to accomplish a private vengeance, certainly that would be said privately.

"We have used him. Badly," Grey said, answering the thought, and his brother grimaced again.

"Depends on how you look at the results," Hal said, but his voice lacked conviction.

Grey rose, stretching his back.

"No," he said, and was surprised to find that he felt very calm. "No, the results may justify it—but the means ... I think we must admit the means."

Hal swung round to look at him, one brow raised. "And if we do?"

"Then you can't stop him, if he's decided to fight. Or not 'can't,' " Grey corrected himself. "But you won't. It's his choice to make."

Hal snorted a little, but didn't disagree. "Do you think he does want it?" he asked after a moment. "He intimates that he threw Twelvetrees's treason in his face publicly to stop his machinations before they could go too far—and he certainly accomplished that much. But do you think he foresaw that

Twelvetrees would call him out? Well, yes, I suppose he did," Hal answered himself. "Twelvetrees couldn't do otherwise. But does Fraser want this duel?"

Grey saw what his brother was getting at and shook his head. "You mean that we might be doing him a favor by preventing his fighting. No." He smiled affectionately at his brother and put down his cup. "It's simple, Hal. Put yourself in his place, and think what you'd do. He may not be an Englishman, but his honor is equal to yours, and so is his determination. I could not pay him a greater compliment."

"Hmmph," said Hal, and flushed a little. "Well. Had you better take him to the *salle des armes* tomorrow, then? Give him a bit of practice before he meets Twelvetrees? Supposing he does choose swords."

"I don't think there will be time." The feeling of calm was spreading; he felt almost as though he floated in the warm light of fire and candles, as though it bore him up.

Hal was staring at him suspiciously.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I thought it out this afternoon, and reached the same conclusions that we have just come to. Then I sent a note to Edward Twelvetrees, demanding satisfaction for his insult to me at the club."

Hal's jaw dropped.

"You ... what?"

Grey reached into the pocket of his waistcoat and pulled out the crumpled note.

"And he's replied. Six o'clock tomorrow morning, in the gardens behind Lambeth Palace. Sabers. Odd, that. I should have thought he'd be a rapier man."



Duello

Much to his surprise, he slept that night. A deep, dreamless sleep from which he woke quite suddenly in the dark, aware that the day was coming.

An instant later, the door opened, and Tom Byrd came in with a candle and his tea tray, a can of hot shaving water balanced in the crook of his arm.

"Will you have some breakfast, me lord?" he asked. "I brought rolls with butter and jam, but Cook thinks you should have a proper cooked breakfast. To keep up your strength, like."

"Thank Cook for me, Tom," Grey said, smiling. He sat up on the side of the bed and scratched himself. He felt surprisingly well.

"No," he said, taking the roll to which Tom had just applied a lavish knifeful of apricot preserve, "this will do." If he were facing a daylong battle, he'd tuck solidly into the ham and eggs, black pudding, and anything else on offer—but whatever happened today wouldn't last more than a few minutes, and he wanted to feel light on his feet.

Tom laid out his clothes and stirred up the shaving soap while Grey ate, then the valet turned round, razor in hand and a determined look on his face.

"I'm a-going with you, me lord. This morning."

"You are?"

Tom nodded, jaw set.

"Yes, I am. I heard the duke and you talk about it last night, saying he oughtn't to be there, and that's all well and good; I see that him being there would just make more trouble. I can't second you, of course. But somebody ought to —to be there, at least. So I'm going."

Grey looked down into his tea, quite moved.

"Thank you, Tom," he said, when he could trust his voice. "I shall be very happy to have you with me."



In fact, he was glad of Tom's company. The young man didn't speak, seeing that Grey was in no mood for conversation, but sat opposite him in the carriage, Grey's best cavalry saber balanced carefully on his knees.

He would have a second, though. Hal had asked Harry Quarry to meet Grey at the ground.

"Not only for moral support," Hal had said. "I want there to be a witness." His mouth thinned. "Just in case."

Grey had wondered, in case of what? Some chicanery on the part of Twelvetrees? The sudden appearance of the Archbishop of Canterbury, roused by the noise? He didn't ask, though, fearing that the "just in case" Hal had in mind involved having someone present to memorize Grey's dying words—unless you took the blade through the eye or the roof of the mouth, you usually did have a few moments while bleeding to death in which to compose your epitaph or send an elegantly phrased farewell to your beloved.

He thought of that now and wondered briefly just what Jamie Fraser would do, if made the recipient of some particularly florid sentiment of a personal nature, with Grey safely out of neck-breaking range. The thought made him grin. He caught sight of Tom's shocked expression and hastily erased the grin, replacing it with a grave look more suitable to the occasion.

Maybe Harry would write his epitaph. In verse.

Master me ... Damn, he never had found the other line to his couplet. Or did he need two lines? Me/be—that rhymed. Maybe it was two lines, not one. If it was really two lines he had, then he clearly needed two more to make a quatrain ...

The carriage pulled to a halt.

He emerged into a fresh, cool dawn and stood still, breathing, while Tom made his way out, handling the sword gingerly in its scabbard. There were two other carriages pulled up, waiting under the dripping trees; it had rained in the night, though the sky had cleared.

The grass will be wet. Bad footing.

Little jolts of electricity were running through him, tightening his muscles. The feeling reminded him—vividly—of his experience of being shocked by an electric eel the year before, and he paused to stretch, easing the tightness in chest and arm. It was the bloody eel that had led to his last duel, the one in which Nicholls was killed. At least if he killed Twelvetrees this morning, it would be on purpose ...

Not if.

"Come on," he said to Tom, and they walked past the other carriages, nodding to the coachmen, who returned their salutes, sober-faced. The horses' breath rose steaming.

The last time he had been here, it was for a garden party to which his mother had required him to escort her.

Mother ... Well, Hal would tell her if ... He put the thought aside. It didn't do to think too much.

The big wrought-iron gates were closed and padlocked, but the small man-gate beside them was open. He passed through and walked toward the open ground on the far side of the garden, his heels ringing on the wet flagstones.

Best fight in stocking feet, he thought—no, barefoot, and then came out from under an archway covered with climbing roses into the open ground. Twelvetrees stood at the far side, under some kind of tree flocked with white blossoms. Grey was interested—and relieved—to see that Reginald Twelvetrees was not with his brother. He recognized Joseph Honey, a captain of the Lancers, who was evidently Twelvetrees's second, and a man with his back turned, who from his dress—and the box by his feet—appeared to be a surgeon. Apparently, Twelvetrees planned to survive, if wounded.

Well, he would, wouldn't he? he thought, almost absently. He was already beginning the withdrawal from conscious thought, his body relaxing, easing, rising into eagerness for the fight. He felt well, very well. The western sky had changed to a luminous violet, the final stars almost gone. Behind him, the eastern sky had gone to pink and gold; he felt the breath of dawn on the back of his neck.

He heard footsteps on the path behind him. Harry, no doubt. But it wasn't Harry who ducked his way under the rose-covered arch and came toward him. His heart jumped; he felt it distinctly.

"What the devil are you doing here?" he blurted.

"I am your second." Fraser spoke matter-of-factly, as though Grey ought to have expected this. He was dressed soberly, in the borrowed blue livery he had worn on his first night at Argus House, and wore a sword. Where had he got that?

"You are? But how did you find out—"

"The duchess told me."

"Oh. Well, she would, wouldn't she?" He didn't bother being annoyed with Minnie for minding his business. "But Harry Quarry—"

"I spoke with Colonel Quarry. We agreed that I should have the honor of seconding you." Grey wondered for an instant whether "agreed" was a euphemism for "knocked on the head," as he couldn't see Quarry yielding his office with any grace. Still and all, he couldn't help smiling at Fraser, who gave him a small, formal inclination of the head.

He then reached into his pocket and withdrew a slip of paper, folded once. "Your brother bade me give ye this."

"Thank you." He took the paper and put it into his bosom. There was no need to open it; he knew what it said. *Luck.*— *H*.

Jamie Fraser looked across the field to where Twelvetrees stood with his two companions, then looked soberly down at Grey. "He must not live. Ye may trust me to see to that."

"If he kills me, you mean," Grey said. The electricity that ran in little jolts through his veins had settled now to a fine constant hum. He could hear his heartbeat, thumping in his ears, fast and strong. "I'm much obliged to you, Mr. Fraser."

To his astonishment, Fraser smiled at him.

"It will be my pleasure to avenge ye, my lord. If necessary."

"Call me John," he blurted. "Please."

The Scot's face went blank with his own astonishment. He cast down his eyes for a moment, thinking. Then he put a hand solidly on Grey's shoulder and said something softly in the Gaelic, but in the midst of the odd, sibilant words, Grey thought he heard his father's name. *Iain mac Gerard* ... was that him?

The hand lifted, leaving the feel of its weight behind.

"What—" he said, but Fraser interrupted him.

"It is the blessing for a warrior going out. The blessing of Michael of the Red Domain." His eyes met Grey's squarely, a darker blue than the dawning sky. "May the grace of Michael Archangel strengthen your arm ... John."



Grey said something very obscene under his breath, and Jamie looked sharply in the direction of his gaze, though he saw nothing more than Edward Twelvetrees, already stripped to shirt and breeks, looking like a chilled ferret without his wig, talking to an officer in uniform—presumably his second—and a man whom Jamie supposed to be a surgeon.

"It's Dr. John Hunter," Grey said, nodding at the surgeon, whom he was regarding narrowly. "The Body-Snatcher himself." He caught his lower lip in his teeth for a moment, then turned to Jamie.

"If I'm killed, you take my body from the field. Take me home. Under no circumstances let Dr. Hunter anywhere near me."

"Surely he—"

"Yes, he bloody would. Without an instant's hesitation. Swear you will not let him touch me."

Jamie gave Dr. Hunter a closer look, but the man didn't look overtly like a ghoul. He was short—a good four inches shorter than John Grey—but very broad in the shoulder and plainly a vigorous man. He glanced back at Grey, mentally envisioning Hunter tossing Grey's limp body over his shoulder and loping off with it. Grey caught and interpreted this glance.

"Swear," he said fiercely.

"I swear upon my hope of heaven."

Grey drew breath and relaxed a little.

"Good." He was pale, but his eyes were blazing and his face alert, excited but not afraid. "You go and talk to Honey, then. That's Twelvetrees's second, Captain Joseph Honey."

Jamie nodded and strode toward the little group under the trees. He'd fought two duels himself, but neither had been with seconds; he'd never undertaken this office before, but Harry Quarry had given him a brief instruction on his role:

"The seconds are meant to discuss the situation and see whether it can be resolved without an actual fight—if the party of the first part will withdraw or rephrase the insult, say, or the insulted party will agree to some other form of redress. In this instance, I'd say the odds of it being resolved without a fight are approximately three million to one, so don't strain yourself in the cause of diplomacy. If he happens to kill Grey quickly, though, you'll take care of him, won't you?"

Captain Honey saw him coming and met him halfway. Honey was young, perhaps in his early twenties, and much paler than either of the combatants.

"Joseph Honey, your servant, sir," he said, offering his hand. "I—I am not sure what to say, really."

"That makes the two of us," Jamie assured him. "I take it Captain Twelvetrees doesna intend to withdraw his assertion that Lord John is a sodomite?"

The word made Captain Honey blush, and he looked down.

"Er ... no. And I quite understand that your principal will not brook the insult?"

"Certainly not," Jamie said. "Ye wouldna expect it, would ye?"

"Oh, no!" Honey looked aghast at the suggestion. "But I did have to ask." He swallowed. "Well. Um ... terms. Sabers —I see your principal is suitably equipped; I'd brought an extra, just in case. At ten—oh, no, you don't do paces when it's swords, naturally not ... er ... Will your principal agree to first blood?"

Jamie smiled, but not in a friendly fashion.

"Would yours?"

"Worth a try, isn't it?" Honey rallied bravely, looking up at Jamie. "If Lord John would be willing—"

"He is not."

Honey nodded, looking unhappy.

"Right. Well, then ... there's not much more to say, is there?" He bowed to Jamie and turned away, but then turned back. "Oh—we have brought a surgeon. He is of course at Lord John's service, should that be necessary."

Jamie saw Honey's eyes travel past him, and he glanced over his shoulder to see Lord John, stripped to shirt and breeches, barefoot on the wet grass, warming his muscles with a series of slashes and lunges that, while not showy, clearly indicated that he knew how to use a saber. Honey exhaled audibly.

"I dinna think ye'll have to fight him," Jamie said gently. He looked toward the trees and saw Twelvetrees openly gauging him. Eyes meeting the other man's, Jamie very slowly stretched himself, displaying both reach and confidence. Twelvetrees's mouth quirked up at one corner, acknowledging the information—but in no way disturbed at the possibilities. Either he thought there was no chance of his having to fight Jamie—or he thought he could win if he did. Jamie inclined his head in a slight bow.

Grey had turned his back on Twelvetrees and was tossing the sword lightly from hand to hand.

The weight of the saber felt good in his hand, solid, heavy. The freshly sharpened edge glittered in the light; he could still smell the oil of the sharpening stone; it made the hairs prickle agreeably down his arms.

Jamie walked back, to find that Harry Quarry had joined Lord John and Tom Byrd. The colonel nodded at him.

"Couldn't stay away," he said, half-apologetically.

"Ye mean His Grace doesna quite trust me to give him a complete report of the outcome—should that be necessary?"

"Partly that. Mostly—dammit, he's my friend."

Grey had barely registered Harry's arrival, absorbed as he was in his own preparations, but he heard that and smiled.

"Thank you, Harry." He walked to his supporters, suffused with a sudden overwhelming affection for the three of them. The lines of the old folk song drifted through his mind: *God send each noble man at his end / Such hawks, such hounds, and such a friend.* He wondered briefly which was which and decided that Tom must be his faithful hound, Harry of course

the friend, and Jamie Fraser his hawk, untamed and ferocious but there with him at the last—if that's what it was, though in all honesty he thought not.

I can feel my heart beating. Feel my breath. How can it stop?

Harry reached out and clasped his hand quickly. He smiled reassuringly at Tom, who was standing there clutching his coat, waistcoat, and stockings, looking as though he might faint. Some unspoken signal ran among the men, and the opponents walked out to face each other.

Wet grass feels wonderful, cold, fresh. Bastard's been up all night, his eyes are red. He does look like a ferret—or a badger—without his wig. Should have polled my hair, but what the hell, too late now ...

His saber touched Twelvetrees's sword with a tiny chime of metal, and electricity ran smoothly up his back and over him, out to the tips of his fingers. He took a harder grip.

"Go," said Captain Honey, and sprang back out of the way.

Jamie could see at a glance that both men were excellent swordsmen. Neither one was concerned with showing away, though; this was deadly business, and they set about each other with a concentrated ferocity, seeking advantage. A flock of doves erupted out of the trees in an uproar of wings, frightened by the noise.

It couldn't last long. Jamie knew that. Most sword fights were decided in a matter of minutes, and no one could keep up such effort with a heavy saber for much more than a quarter hour. Yet he felt as though it had already lasted much longer. Sweat crawled down his back, in spite of the cool morning.

He was so attuned to the fight that he felt his own muscles twitch, echoing the surge, the lunge, the gasp and grunt of effort, and his hands were clenched at his sides, clenched so hard that the knuckles and joints of his bad hand popped and grated.

Grey knew what he was about; he'd got a knee between

Twelvetrees's thighs and a hand behind the other man's neck, his sword hand held out of the way as he grappled to bring Twelvetrees's head down. Twelvetrees was no novice, either, though, and pushed forward into Grey's hold rather than pulling back. Grey staggered, off balance for an instant, and Twelvetrees broke loose and leapt back with a loud cry, swiping at Grey.

Grey dodged back, too, but not quickly enough, and Jamie heard a strangled cry of protest from his own throat as a line of red opened as if by magic across the top of Grey's leg, followed by a rapid curtain of blood crawling down the cloth of his breeches.

Shit.

Grey lunged, disregarding—or not noticing—the injury, and though his hurt leg gave way and he fell to one knee, he caught Twelvetrees a ringing blow with the flat of his saber, over the left ear. Twelvetrees staggered, shaking his head, and Grey got laboriously to his feet and lunged, missing his aim and slicing through the meat of Twelvetrees's arm.

Got you. Bastard. Got you!

"Pity it's not his sword arm," muttered Quarry. "That would end it."

"Nothing will end this but death," said Captain Honey. The young man was white to the lips, and Jamie wondered briefly if he'd ever seen a man killed before.

Twelvetrees fell back, opening himself, and Grey rushed him, realizing too late that it was a trap; Twelvetrees brought the pommel of his sword down in a vicious thunk on Grey's head, half-stunning him. Grey dropped his sword and lurched forward into Twelvetrees, though, flung his arms about the other man's body, and fell back onto his good leg, lifting Twelvetrees over his hip and slamming him to the ground.

Take that, arse-wipe! Christ, my ears are ringing, damn you ... damn ...

"Oh, very pretty, sir, very pretty!" cried Dr. Hunter, beating his hands enthusiastically. "Did you ever see a more beautiful cross-buttock throw?"

"Well, not in a duel, no," Quarry said, blinking.

Grey stood, mouth open and chest heaving. He picked up his saber, half-leaning on it as he fought for breath. Wisps of hair clung wetly to his face, and rivulets of blood coursed slowly down his cheek and his bare calf.

"Do you ... yield, sir?" he said.

Come on, come on! Get up, let's finish it! Hurry!

Twelvetrees, winded from the fall, did not reply but, after a moment, succeeded in rolling over, slowly managing to get to his knees. He crawled to his fallen sword, picked it up, and got slowly to his feet, but in such a manner of deliberate menace as made his answer clear.

Grey got his own sword up in time, and the sabers met with a sliding clash that locked their hilts. Without hesitation, Grey punched Twelvetrees in the face with his free hand. Twelvetrees grabbed at Grey's head, caught his clubbed hair, and yanked hard, pulling Grey off balance. His arm was weakened by the cut, though, spattering blood, and he could not keep his grip—Grey got his saber loose and hacked viciously at the other's body with a loud grunt.

Jamie winced, hearing Twelvetrees's hoarse cry and feeling that blow go home. He had a curving scar across his own ribs, inflicted by an English saber at Prestonpans.

Grey pressed his advantage as Twelvetrees staggered back, but the ferret was wily and ducked under Grey's lunge, collapsing onto one hand and thrusting upward, straight into Grey's unprotected chest.

Fuck!

There was a gasp from all the watchers. Grey pulled loose, reeled backward, coughing, his shirt reddening. Twelvetrees got his legs under him, but it took him two tries to stand, his legs shaking visibly.

Grey collapsed slowly to his knees, swaying to and fro, the saber hanging from his hand.

Fuck ...

"Get up, me lord. Get up, please get up," Tom was whispering in anguish, his hand clutching Quarry's coat sleeve. Quarry was breathing like a boiling kettle.

"He's got to ask him to yield," Quarry was muttering. "Got to. Infamous not to—oh, God."

Twelvetrees took a step toward Grey, unsteady, face set in a rictus that showed his sharp teeth. His mouth moved, but no words came out. He drew one step closer, drawing back his bloodied sword. One more step.

One ... more ...

And Grey's saber rose fast and smooth, Grey rising after it, driving it home, hard into the ferret's belly. There was an inhuman noise, but Jamie couldn't tell which of them had made it. Grey let go of his sword and sat down suddenly on the grass, looking surprised. He looked up and smiled vaguely at Tom, then his eyes rolled up into his head and he fell backward, sprawled on the wet grass, welling blood.

Oh ... Jesus ...

Twelvetrees was still standing, hands closed around the blade in his belly, looking bemused. Dr. Hunter and Captain Honey were running across the grass and reached him just as he fell, catching him between them.

Jamie wondered briefly whether Twelvetrees had given Captain Honey instructions regarding his body, but dismissed the thought as he ran across the grass to his friend.

Take me ... ho



Billets-Doux

"If the blow had gone between your ribs, you'd be dead, you know."

It wasn't the first time Grey had heard this—it wasn't even the first time he'd heard it from Hal—but it was the first time he'd had the strength to reply to it.

"I know." The thrust had in fact—he'd been told, first by Dr. Hunter, and then by Dr. Maguire, the Greys' family physician, and finally by Dr. Latham, the regimental surgeon—struck him in the third rib, then sliced sideways for two or three inches before the tip of the saber had stuck in the bone of his sternum. It hadn't hurt at the time; he'd just been conscious of the jolting force of the blow.

"Hurt much?" Hal sat on his bed, peering closely at him.

"Yes. Get off."

Hal didn't move.

"In your right mind, are you?"

"Certainly. Are you?" Grey felt extremely cross. It did hurt, his bum had lost all feeling from sitting in bed, and now that the fever had passed, he was very hungry.

"Twelvetrees died this morning."

"Oh." He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again, feeling an apologetic gratitude for hunger and pain. "God rest his soul."

He'd known Twelvetrees was almost certain to die; it was

rare to recover from a serious wound to the abdomen, and he'd felt his sword strike bone somewhere deep inside Twelvetrees; he'd gone through the man's guts, entire. If blood loss and shock didn't do for a man, infection would. Still, there was a somber finality to the news that jarred him.

"Well," he said, clearing his throat. "Has Reginald Twelvetrees sent round an official demand for my head yet? Or at least my arrest?"

Hal shook his head, unamused.

"He can't say a word, not with everyone thinking—and saying—that Edward was a traitor. You're more or less being hailed as a public hero."

Grey was staggered. "What? What for?"

Hal gave him a raised eyebrow. "After you exposed Bernard Adams as a Jacobite plotter two years ago? And then what Fraser said to Twelvetrees at the Beefsteak? Everyone thinks you challenged him because of his treasonous behavior—not that they know what that was, thank God."

"But that—I didn't—"

"Well, I know you didn't, ass," his brother said. "But as you didn't take out a notice in the newpapers saying he'd called you a pederast and you took exception to it—and he didn't take out a notice saying he thought you were a menace to society and proposed to support his opinion by force of arms—the public has as usual made up its own mind."

Grey's left arm was in a sling, but he rubbed his right hand hard over his stubbled face. He was disturbed by the news but not sure what to do about it, if anything could be done, once—

"Oh, bloody hell," he said. "The newspapers have got hold of it."

"Oh, yes." A muscle twitched at the corner of Hal's mouth. "Minnie's saved a few of the better ones for you. When

you're feeling up to it."

Grey gave Hal a look. "When I feel up to it," he said, "I have a thing or two to say to your wife."

Hal smiled broadly at that. "Be my guest," he said. "And I hope you've a fine day for it." He got up, jostling Grey's bad leg. "Are you hungry? Cook has some revolting gruel for you. Also burnt toast with calf's-foot jelly."

"For God's sake, Hal!" The mingled outrage and pleading in his voice appeared to move his brother.

"I'll see what I can do." Hal leaned over and patted him quite gently on his good shoulder.

"I'm glad you're not dead. Wasn't sure for a bit."

Hal went out before he could reply. Tears welled in John's eyes, and he dashed at them with the sleeve of his nightshirt, muttering irritably in a vain attempt to convince himself that he wasn't moved.

Before he got very far with this, his attention was distracted by noise in the hallway: the sort of disturbance caused by small boys attempting to be quiet, with loud whisperings and shushings, punctuated by shoving and bumping into walls.

"Come in," he called, and the door opened. A small head poked cautiously round the corner.

"Hallo, Ben. What's a-do?"

Benjamin's face, apprehensive, relaxed at once in delight.

"You all right, Uncle? Mama said if the sword—"

"I know, I'd be dead. But I'm not, now, am I?"

Ben squinted carefully at him, dubious, but decided to take this statement at face value and, turning round, rushed to the door, hissing something into the passage. He came dashing back, now followed by his younger brothers, Adam and Henry. All of them leapt on the bed, though Benjamin and Adam prevented Henry—who was only five and didn't know better—from trying to sit in Grey's lap.

"Can we see where the sword went in, Uncle?" Adam

asked.

"I suppose so." The wound had a dressing, but the doctor was coming later to change it, so no harm in pulling it off, he supposed. He unbuttoned his nightshirt one-handed and rather gingerly detached the bandage. His nephews' awed admiration was more than adequate recompense for the discomfort involved.

After the initial chorus of "Ooh!" Ben leaned forward to look more closely. It was a fairly impressive wound, Grey admitted, glancing down; whichever surgeon had seen to him—he hadn't been in any condition to notice—had lengthened the original slash so as to be able to pick out the fragments of his sternum that Twelvetrees's saber had dislodged and the bits of his shirt that had been driven into the wound. The result was a six-inch gash across the already scarred left side of his upper chest, a nasty dark red crisscrossed with coarse black stitches.

"Does it hurt?" Ben asked seriously.

"Not so bad," Grey said. "The itching on my leg's worse."

"Lemme see!" Henry began to scrabble at the bedclothes. The resultant squabble among the three brothers nearly pitched Grey onto the floor, but he managed to raise his voice enough to restore order, whereupon he pulled back the blanket and lifted his nightshirt to display the slash across the top of his thigh.

It was a shallow wound, though impressively long, and while it did still hurt a bit, he'd been honest in saying the itching was worse. Doctor Maguire had recommended a poultice of magnesium sulfate, soap, and sugar, to draw the poisons from the wounds. Doctor Latham, arriving an hour later, had removed the poultice, saying this was all great nonsense, and air would help to dry the stitches.

Grey had lain inert through both processes, having only enough strength to feel gratitude that Doctor Hunter had not come to give his opinion—he would probably have whipped out his saw and made off with the leg, thus settling the argument. Having renewed his acquaintance with the good doctor, he had somewhat more sympathy with Tobias Quinn and his horror of being anatomized after death.

"You've got a big willy, Uncle John," Adam observed.

"About the usual for a grown man, I think. Though I believe it's given fairly general satisfaction."

The boys all sniggered, though Grey thought that only Benjamin had any idea why, and wondered with interest where Ben's tutor had been taking him. Adam and Henry were too young yet to go anywhere, being still in the nursery with Nanny, but Ben had a young man named Whibley who was meant to be teaching him the rudiments of Latin. Minnie said Mr. Whibley spent much more time making sheep's eyes at the assistant cook than he did in dividing Gaul into three parts, but he did take Ben to the theater now and then, in the name of culture.

"Mama says you killed the other man," Adam remarked. "Where did you stick him?"

"In the belly."

"Colonel Quarry said the other man was an uncon-sheubble tick," Benjamin said, working out the syllables carefully.

"Unconscionable. Yes, I suppose so. I hope so."

"For why?" asked Adam.

"If you have to kill someone, it's best to have a reason."

All three boys nodded solemnly, like a nestful of owls, but then demanded more details of the duel, eager to hear how much blood there had been, how many times Uncle John had stuck the bad fellow, and what they had said to each other.

"Did he call you vile names and utter foul oaths?" asked Benjamin.

"Foul oafs," Henry murmured happily to himself. "Foul oafs, foul oafs."

"I don't think we said anything, really. That's what your second does—he goes and talks to the other fellow's second, and they try to see if things can be arranged so that you don't need to fight."

This seemed a most peculiar notion to his audience, and the struggle to explain just why one wouldn't always want to fight someone exhausted him, so that he greeted with relief the arrival of a footman bearing a tray—even though the tray bore nothing more than a bowl of gray slop that he assumed was gruel and another of bread and milk.

The boys ate the bread and milk, passing the bowl round the bed in a companionable way, dribbling on the covers and vying with one another to tell him the news of the household: Nasonby had fallen down the front stair and had to have his ankle strapped up; Cook had had a disagreement with the fishmonger, who sent plaice instead of salmon, and so the fishmonger wouldn't bring any more fish, and so supper last night was pancakes and they all pretended it was Shrove Tuesday; Lucy the spaniel had had her pups in the bottom of the upstairs linen closet, and Mrs. Weston the housekeeper had had a fit—

"Did she fall down and foam at the mouth?" Grey asked, interested.

"Probably," Benjamin said cheerfully. "We didn't get to look. Cook gave her sherry, though."

Henry and Adam were by now cuddling against his sides, their wriggly warmth and the sweet smell of their heads a comfort that, in his weakness, threatened to make him tearful again. To avoid this, Grey cleared his throat and asked Ben to recite something for him.

Ben frowned thoughtfully, looking so much like Hal considering a hand of cards that Grey's emotion changed abruptly to amusement. He managed not to laugh—it hurt his chest very much to laugh—and relaxed, listening to an execrably performed rendition of "The Twelve Days of

Christmas," this interrupted by the entrance of Minnie, followed by Pilcock with a second tray from which appetizing smells wafted.

"Whatever are you doing to your poor uncle John?" she demanded. "Look what you've done to his bed! Off with the lot of you!"

The bedroom purged, she looked down her nose at John and shook her head. She had on a tiny lace cap, with her ripe-wheat hair put up, and looked charmingly domestic.

"Hal says the doctor be damned and Cook, too: you are to have steak and eggs, with a mixed grill. So steak you shall have, and if you die or burst or rot as a result, it will be your own fault."

Grey had already plunged a fork into a succulent grilled tomato and was chewing blissfully.

"Oh, God," he said. "Thank you. Thank Hal. Thank Cook. Thank everybody." He swallowed and speared a mushroom.

Despite her earlier disavowal, Minnie looked pleased. She loved feeding people. She motioned the footman off and sat down on the edge of the bed to enjoy the spectacle.

"Hal said you wanted to scold me about something." She didn't look at all apprehensive at the prospect.

"I didn't say that," Grey protested, pausing with a chunk of bloody steak held in transit. "I just said I could do with a word."

She folded her hands and looked at him, not quite batting her eyelashes.

"Well, actually, I meant to reproach you with sharing your insights regarding my motives with Mr. Fraser, but as it is ..."

"As it is, I was right about them?"

He shrugged, mouth too full of steak to answer.

"Of course I was," she answered for him. "And as Mr. Fraser is no fool, I doubt he needed telling. He did, however, ask me why I thought you'd challenged Edward Twelvetrees.

So I told him."

"Where ... um ... where is Mr. Fraser at the moment?" he asked, swallowing and reaching at once for a forkful of egg.

"I suppose he's where he has been for the last three days, reading his way through Hal's library. And speaking of reading ..." She lifted a small stack of letters—which he hadn't noticed, his whole attention being focused on food—off the tray and deposited them on his stomach.

They were tinted pink or blue and smelled of perfume. He looked at her, brows raised in inquiry.

"Billets-doux," she said sweetly. "From your admirers."

"What admirers?" he demanded, setting down his fork in order to remove the letters. "And how do you know what's in them?"

"I read them," she said without the faintest blush. "As for whom, I doubt you know many of the ladies, though you've likely danced with some of them. There are a great many women, though—particularly young and giddy ones—who positively swoon over men who fight duels. The ones who survive, that is," she added pragmatically.

He opened a letter with his thumb and held it in one hand, going on eating with the other as he read it. His brows went up.

"I've never met this woman. Yet she professes herself besotted with me—well, she's certainly besotted, I'll say that much—consumed with admiration for my valor, my excessive courage, my ... Oh, dear." He felt a slow blush rising in his own cheeks and put the letter down. "Are they all like that?"

"Some much worse," Minnie assured him, laughing. "Do you never think of marriage, John? It is the only way to preserve yourself from this sort of attention, you know."

"No," he said absently, scanning another of the missives as he wiped sauce from his plate with a chunk of bread. "I should be a most unsatisfactory husband. Holy Lord! *I am*

enraptured by the vision of your valiance, the power of your puissant sword—Stop laughing, Minerva, you'll rupture something. This didn't happen when I fought Edwin Nicholls."

"Actually, it did," she said, picking up the discarded letters, some of which had fallen to the floor. "You weren't here, having absconded to Canada in the most craven fashion, and all just to avoid marrying Caroline Woodford. Putting aside the question of a wife, do you not long for children, John? Do you not want a son?"

"Having just spent half an hour with yours, no," he said, though in fact this was not true, and Minerva knew it; she merely laughed again and handed him the tidy pile of letters.

"Well, in fact, the public response to your duel with Nicholls was quite subdued compared with this. For one thing, it was hushed up as much as possible, and for another, it was only fought over the honor of a lady rather than the honor of the kingdom. Hal said I needn't forward the letters to you in Canada, so I didn't."

"Thank you." He made to hand the letters back to her. "Here, burn them."

"If you insist." She dimpled at him, but took the pile and stood up. "Oh, wait—you haven't opened this one."

"I thought you'd read them all."

"Only the female ones. This looked more like business." She picked a plain cover from the stack of hued and scented ones and handed it over. There was no return direction upon the cover, but there was a name, written in a neat, small hand. *H. Bowles*.

A most extraordinary feeling of revulsion came over him at sight of it, and he suddenly lost his appetite.

"No," he said, and gave it back. "Burn that one, too."



All Heads Turn as the Hunt Goes By

Hubert Bowles was a spymaster. Grey had met him some years previously, in connection with a private matter, and had hoped never to meet him again. He couldn't imagine what the little beast wanted with him now and didn't propose to find out.

Still, the boys' visit and the meal had restored him to such an extent that when Tom appeared—as he did with the regularity of a cuckoo clock—to ensure that Grey had not managed to die since last inspected, he let Tom shave him and brush out and plait his hair. Then, greatly daring, he stood up, clinging to Tom's arm.

"Easy, me lord, easy does it now ..." The room wavered slightly, but he steadied himself and, after a moment, the dizziness passed. He limped slowly about, hanging on to Tom, until he was reasonably sure that he would neither fall down nor rip the stitching out of his leg—it pulled a bit, but so long as he was careful, it would likely do.

"All right. I'm going downstairs."

"No, you're no—er ... yes, me lord," Tom replied meekly, his initial response quelled by a glare from Grey. "I'll just, ah, go down in front of you, shall I?"

"So that I can fall on you, if necessary? That's truly noble, Tom, but I think not. You can follow me and pick up the pieces, if you like."

He made his way slowly down the main stair, Tom behind him muttering something about all the king's horses and all the king's men, and then along the main hallway to the library, nodding cordially to Nasonby and inquiring after his bad ankle.

Fraser was indeed sitting in a wing chair near the window, a plate of biscuits and a decanter of sherry at his side, reading *Robinson Crusoe*. He glanced up at the sound of Grey's footsteps, and his eyebrows went up—perhaps in surprise at seeing him up and about, or perhaps only in astonishment at his banyan, which was silk, with green and purple stripes.

"Are you not going to tell me that had the sword gone between my ribs, I'd be dead? Everyone else does," Grey remarked, lowering himself gingerly into the matching wing chair.

Fraser looked faintly puzzled.

"I kent it hadna done that. Ye weren't dead when I picked ye up."

"You picked me up?"

"You asked me to, did ye not?" Fraser gave him a look of mild exasperation. "Ye were bleeding like a stuck hog, but it wasna spurting out, and I could feel ye breathing and your heart beating all right while I carried ye back to the coach."

"Oh. Thank you." Dammit, couldn't he have waited a few moments longer to pass out?

To distract himself from pointless regret, he took a biscuit and asked, "Have you spoken with my brother lately?"

"I have. Nay more than an hour ago." He hesitated, a thumb stuck inside the book to keep his place. "He offered me a sum of money. In reward of my assistance, as he was pleased to put it."

"Well deserved," Grey said heartily, hoping that Hal hadn't been an ass about it.

"I told him it had the stink of blood money and I wouldna

touch it ... but he pointed out that I hadna done what I'd done for money—and that's true enough. In fact, he said, he'd forced me to do it—which is not entirely true, but I wasna disposed to argue the fine points—and that he wished to recompense me for the inconvenience to which he had put me." He gave Grey a wry look. "I said I thought this a jesuitical piece o' reasoning, but he replied that as I'm a Papist, he supposed I could have no reasonable objection on those grounds.

"He also pointed out," Fraser went on, "that I was under no obligation to keep the money myself; he would be pleased to pay it out to anyone I specified. And, after all, there were still folk who were under my protection, were there not?"

Grey sent up a silent prayer of thanksgiving. Hal hadn't been an ass.

"Indeed there are," Grey said. "Who do you propose to help?"

Fraser narrowed his eyes a bit but had plainly been thinking about it.

"Well, there's my sister and her husband. They've the six bairns—and there are my tenants—" He caught himself, lips compressed for a moment "Families who *were* my tenants," he corrected.

"How many?" Grey asked, curious.

"Maybe forty families—maybe not so many now. But still ..."

Hal must have come well up to scratch on the reward, Grey thought.

Grey didn't wish to dwell on the matter. He coughed and rang the bell for a footman to bring him a drink. His chances of getting anything stronger than barley water in his bedroom were slim, and he wasn't fond of sherry.

"Returning to my brother," he said, having given his order for brandy, "I wondered whether he has said anything to you regarding the court-martial or the progress of ... er ... the, um, military operation." The arrest of the incriminated officers of the Irish Brigades, he meant.

The frown returned, this time troubled and somewhat fierce.

"He has," Fraser replied shortly. "The court-martial is set for Friday. He wished me to remain, in case my testimony is required."

Grey was shaken; he hadn't thought Hal would have Fraser testify. If Jamie did, he would be a marked man. The testimony of a general court-martial became by law part of the public record of the Judge Advocate's court; it would be impossible to hide Fraser's part in the investigation of Siverly's affairs or the revelation of Twelvetrees's treachery. Even if there were no direct linkage made to the quashing of the Irish Brigades' plot, Jacobite sympathizers—and there were still many, even in London—would draw conclusions. The Irish as a race were known to be vengeful.

A lesser emotion was one of dismay at the thought that Hal might send Fraser back to Helwater so quickly—though in justice there was no reason to keep him in London. He'd done what Hal required of him, however unwillingly.

Was that what Hal was thinking? That if Fraser testified, he could then be quickly sent back to the remote countryside to resume a hidden life as Alexander MacKenzie, safe from retribution?

"As to the ... military operation ..." The broad mouth compressed in a brief grimace. "I believe it is satisfactory. I am naturally not in His Grace's entire confidence, but I heard Colonel Quarry telling him that there had been several significant arrests made yesterday."

"Ah," Grey said, trying to sound neutral. The arrests couldn't help but cause Fraser pain, even though he had agreed with the necessity. "Was ... er ... was Mr. Quinn's name among them?"

"No." Fraser looked disturbed at this. "Are they hunting

Quinn?"

Grey shrugged a little and took a sip of his brandy. It burned agreeably going down.

"They know his name, his involvement," he said, a little hoarsely, and cleared his throat. "And he is a loose cannon. He quite possibly knows who some members of the Wild Hunt are. Do you not think he would make an effort to warn them, if he knows they are exposed?"

"He would, aye." Fraser rose suddenly and went to look out the window, leaning on the frame, his face turned away.

"Do you know where he is?" Grey asked quietly, and Fraser shook his head.

"I wouldna tell ye if I did," he said, just as quietly. "But I don't."

"Would you warn him—if you could?" Grey asked. He oughtn't, but was possessed by curiosity.

"I would," Fraser replied without hesitation. He turned round now and looked down at Grey, expressionless. "He was once my friend."

So was I, Grey thought, and took more brandy. Am I now again? But not even the most exigent curiosity would make him ask.



Justice

The court-martial of Major Gerald Siverly (deceased) was well attended. Everyone from the Duke of Cumberland (who had tried to appoint himself to the board of judges, but been prevented by Hal) to the lowest Fleet Street hack crowded into the Guildhall, this being the largest venue available.

Lord John Grey, pale and limping but steady of eye and voice, testified before the board, this consisting of five officers drawn from various regiments—none of them Siverly's—and the Judge Advocate, that he had received the papers now presented to the board from Captain Charles Carruthers in Canada, where Carruthers had served under Major Siverly and been witness to the actions described herein, and that he, Grey, had heard such further testimony from Carruthers in person as inclined him to believe the documentary evidence as it stood.

Courts-martial had no set procedure, no dock, no Bible, no barristers, no rules of evidence. Anyone who wished to do so might testify or ask questions, and a number of people did so —including the Duke of Cumberland, who thrust his bulk forward before Grey could sit down and came straight up to him, glowering directly into his face from a distance of six inches.

"Is it not true, my lord," Cumberland asked, with heavy sarcasm, "that Major Siverly saved your life at the siege of Quebec?"

"It is, Your Grace."

"And have you no shame at thus betraying your debt to a brother-in-arms?"

"No, I haven't," Grey replied calmly, though his heart was thumping erratically. "Major Siverly's behavior on the field of battle was honorable and valorous—but he would have done the same for any soldier, as would I. For me to withhold evidence of his corruption and his peculations off that field would be a betrayal of the entire army in which I have the honor to serve and a betrayal of all those comrades with whom I have fought through the years."

"Hear him! Hear him!" shouted a voice from the back of the hall, which he rather thought was Harry Quarry's. A general rumbling of approval filled the hall, and Cumberland receded, still glaring.

The testimony went on all day, with various officers of Siverly's regiment coming to offer their own witness, some speaking well of the dead man's character, but others—many others—recounting incidents that supported Carruthers's account. Regimental loyalty counted for a great deal, Grey thought—but regimental honor counted for more, and the thought pleased him.

For Grey, the day gradually blurred into a confusion of faces, voices, uniforms, hard chairs, shouts echoing from the huge beams of the ceiling, the occasional shoving match broken up by the sergeant-at-arms ... and, at the end of it, he found himself in the street outside, momentarily apart from the tumultuous crowd that had spilled out of the Guildhall.

Hal, who had been the most senior officer on the court, was across the street, talking intently to the Judge Advocate, who was nodding. It was late afternoon, and the chimneys of London were all belching forth as the fires were built up for evening. Grey took a grateful lungful of the smoky air, fresh by comparison with the close atmosphere inside the

Guildhall, which was composed in equal parts of sweat, trampled food, tobacco, and the smell of rage—and fear. He'd been aware of that, the tiny thrilling of the nerves among the crowd, the faces that quietly vanished as the testimony mounted.

Hal had been careful to avoid any mention of the Irish Brigades, the Wild Hunt, or the plan to seize the king; there were too many plotters as yet unaccounted for, and no need to alarm the public *a priori*. He had brought up Edward Twelvetrees, though, and his role as Siverly's confidant and co-conspirator—and Grey shivered suddenly, recalling the look on Reginald Twelvetrees's face, the old colonel sitting like a stone near the front of the room, burning eyes fixed on Hal without blinking as the damning words came out, one after another in an overwhelming flood.

Reginald Twelvetrees hadn't said a word, though. What, after all, could he say? He'd left just before the final verdict—guilty, of course, on all charges.

Grey supposed he should feel victorious, or at least vindicated. He'd kept his promise to Charlie, found the truth —a good deal more of it than he'd expected or wanted—and, he supposed, achieved justice.

If you could call it that, he thought dimly, seeing three or four Fleet Street scribblers elbowing one another in an effort to talk to young Eldon Garlock, the ensign who had been the youngest member of the court and thus first to give his verdict.

God knew what they'd write. He only hoped none of it would be about him; he'd experienced the attentions of the press before, though in an entirely favorable way. Having seen the favors of the printers at close range, he could only hope that God would have mercy on those they didn't like.

He had walked away from the crowd, but with no real direction in mind, only wanting to put distance between himself and this day. Absorbed in his thoughts—at least

Jamie Fraser had not been required to testify; that was something—he failed for some time to realize that he was accompanied. Some faint sense of arrhythmia disturbed him, though, an echo of his own footsteps, and at last he glanced aside to see what might be causing it.

He stopped dead, and Hubert Bowles, who had been walking a half step behind him, came up even and stopped, bowing.

"My lord," he said politely. "How do you do?"

"Not that well," he said. "I must ask you to excuse me, Mr. Bowles." He turned to go on, but Bowles stopped him with a hand on his arm. Affronted by the familiarity, Grey jerked back.

"I must ask your forbearance, my lord," Bowles said, with a faint lisp that made it almost "forbearanth." He spoke mildly but with an authority that stopped Grey's making any protest. "I have something to say that you must hear."

Hubert Bowles was small and shapeless, with a round head and rounded back, and with his shabby wig and worn coat, no one would have looked at him twice. Even his face was bland as a boiled pudding, with little black-currant eyes put in. Nonetheless, Grey slowly inclined his head in unwilling acknowledgment.

"Shall we take coffee?" he said, nodding toward a nearby coffeehouse. He wasn't about to invite something like Bowles into any of the clubs where he had membership. He had no notion of the man's antecedents, but his presence made Grey want to wash.

Bowles shook his head. "I think it better if we merely walk," he said, suiting his actions to his words and compelling Grey by a touch on the elbow.

"I am most annoyed with you, my lord," he said in a conversational tone, as they made their way slowly into Gresham Street.

"Are you," Grey said shortly. "I am concerned to hear it."

"You should be. You have killed one of my most valued agents."

"One of—what?"

He stopped, staring down at Bowles, but was urged on by the other's gesture.

"Edward Twelvetrees hath been for some years involved in the suppression of Jacobite plots." A shadow of annoyance crossed Bowles's face at his lisp's struggle with the word "suppression," but Grey was too disturbed at Bowles's statement to take much pleasure in it.

"What, you mean that he has been working for *you*?" He didn't even try to stop it sounding rude, but Bowles didn't react to his tone.

"I mean precisely that, my lord. He had spent a great deal of time and effort in insinuating himself with Major Siverly, once we had determined that Siverly was a person of interest in that regard. His father had been one of the Wild Geese who flew from Limerick, did you know?"

"Yes," Grey said. His lips felt stiff. "I did."

"It is a great inconvenience," Bowles said reprovingly, "when gentlemen will be conducting their own investigations, rather than leaving such things to those whose profession it is."

"So sorry to inconvenience you," Grey said, beginning to grow angry. "Do you mean to tell me that Edward Twelvetrees was *not* a traitor?"

"Quite the reverse, my lord. He served his country in the noblest fashion, working in secrecy and in danger to defeat her enemies." For once, there was a note of warmth in that colorless voice, and, glancing down at his unwelcome companion, Grey realized that Bowles was himself angry—very angry.

"Why the devil did he not say something to me privately?"

"Why should he have trusted you, my lord?" Bowles riposted smartly. "You come from a family whose own

background bears the shadow of treason—"

"It does not!"

"Perhaps not in fact but in perception," Bowles agreed with a nod. "You did well in rooting out Bernard Adams and his fellow plotters, but even the clearing of your father's name will not erase the stain—only time will do that. Time, and the actions of yourself and your brother."

"What do you bloody mean by that, damn you?"

Bowles lifted one sloping shoulder but forbore to reply directly.

"And to speak of his activities to anyone—anyone at all, my lord—was for Edward Twelvetrees to risk the destruction of all his—all our—work. True, Major Siverly was dead, but __"

"Wait. If what you tell me is true, why did Edward Twelvetrees kill Siverly?"

"Oh, he didn't," Bowles said, as though this was a matter of no importance.

"What? Who did, then? I assure you, it wasn't me!"

Bowles actually laughed at that, a small creaking noise that made his hunched back hunch further.

"Of course not, my lord. Edward told me that it was an Irishman—a thin man with curly hair—who struck down Gerald Siverly. He heard raised voices and, upon coming to see the cause, overheard an Irish voice in a passion, denouncing Major Siverly, saying that he knew Siverly had stolen the money.

"In any case, there was an argument, then the sounds of a scuffle. Twelvetrees did not wish to reveal himself but advanced cautiously toward the folly, whereupon he saw a man leap over the railing, spattered with blood, and rush into the wood. He pursued the man but failed to stop him. He saw you run past shortly thereafter and thus hid in the wood until you had passed, then left quietly in the other direction.

"He hadn't seen the Irish gentleman before, though, and was unable to find anyone in the area who knew him. Under the circumstances, he was reluctant to make too many inquiries." He looked up at Grey, mildly inquiring. "I do not suppose you know who he was?"

"His name is Tobias Quinn," Grey said shortly. "And if I were forced to ascribe a motive to him, I imagine it would be that he was a fervid Jacobite himself, and he thought that Siverly proposed to abscond with the money he had collected on behalf of the Stuarts."

"Ah," said Bowles, pleased. "Just so. You see, my lord, that is what I meant about you and your brother. You are in a position to acquire many useful bits of information.

"Captain Twelvetrees had in fact informed me that he thought Siverly was about to abscond with the funds to Sweden; we intended to allow this, as it would have crippled the Irish plan beyond repair. I cannot say how the Irish Jacobites learned of it, but plainly they did."

There was a brief pause, during which Bowles withdrew a clean handkerchief from his pocket—a silk one with lace edging, Grey saw—and blew his nose daintily.

"Do you know Mr. Quinn's present whereabouts, my lord? Or if not, might you make discreet inquiries amongst your Irish acquaintances?"

Grey rounded on him, furious.

"You are inviting me to spy for you, sir?"

"Certainly." Bowles didn't seem discomposed by Grey's clenched fists. "But returning to the subject of Edward Twelvetrees—you must forgive me for seeming to harp upon it, but he really was a most valuable man—he could not say anything regarding his activities, even in private, for fear of those activities being revealed before our plans were complete."

Realization was beginning to push its way through the veil of shock and anger, and Grey felt ill, an unhealthy sweat breaking out on his face.

"What ... plans?"

"Why, the arrest of the Irish Brigade officers involved in the conspiracy. You know about that, I believe?"

"Yes, I do. How do you know about it?"

"Edward Twelvetrees. He brought me the outline of the plan but hadn't yet collected a full list of those involved. 'The Wild Hunt,' they called themselves—most poetic, but what can you expect from the Irish? Edward's untimely death"—a small note of irony was detectable in Mr. Bowles's voice—"kept us from knowing the names of all the men involved. And while your brother's worthy attempt to arrest the conspirators succeeded in bagging some of the prey, it alarmed others, who have either fled the country to cause trouble elsewhere or who have merely sunk into hiding."

Grey opened his mouth, but could find nothing to say. The wound in his chest throbbed hotly with his heartbeat, but what was worse, what burned across his mind, was his memory of Reginald Twelvetrees's face, set like granite, witnessing the destruction of his brother's name.

"I thought you ought to know," Bowles said, almost kindly. "Good day, my lord."



He'd once seen Minnie's cook take a sharpened spoon and cut the flesh of a melon out in little balls. He felt as though each of Bowles's words had been a jab of that spoon, slicing out neat chunks of his heart and bowels, one at a time, scraping him to the rind.

He didn't remember coming back to Argus House. Just suddenly found himself at the door, Nasonby blinking at him in consternation. The man said something; he waved a hand in vague dismissal and walked into the library—thank God Hal's not here; I have to tell him, but, God, not now!—and out

through the French doors, across the garden. His only thought was to find refuge, though he knew there could be none.

Behind the shed, he sat down carefully on the upturned bucket, put his elbows on his knees, and sank his head in his hands.

He could hear the watch ticking in his pocket, each tiny sound seeming to last forever, the stream of them endless. How impossibly long it would be before he died, for only that could put an end to the echo of Bowles's words in the hollow of his mind.

He had no idea how long he sat there, eyes closed, listening to the reproach of his own heartbeat. He didn't bother opening his eyes when footsteps came to a stop before him and the coolness of someone's shadow fell on his hot face.

There was a brief sigh, then big hands took him by the arms and lifted him bodily to his feet.

"Come wi' me," Fraser said quietly. "Walk. It will be easier to say what's happened, walking."

He opened his mouth to protest but hadn't the strength to resist. Fraser took his arm and propelled him firmly through the back gate. There was a narrow lane there, wide enough for barrows and tradesmen's wagons, but at this hour of the day—it was late, he thought dimly, the whole of the lane was in shadow—there were only a few female servants loitering near the gates of the big houses, gossiping or waiting to walk out with a young man. These glanced at the two men sidelong but turned their heads away, lowering their voices as they continued their conversations. He wished passionately that he was one of those women, had a right still to engage in the ordinariness of life.

There was a lump in his throat, hard and round as a walnut. He didn't see how words would ever find their way past it. But Fraser kept hold of his arm, guiding him out into

the street, into Hyde Park.

It was nearly dark, save for the pinprick campfires of the tramps and gypsies who came into the park by night, and there were few of these. At the corner where pamphleteers, electioneers, and those possessed of strong opinions stood to speak, a larger fire was burning, dying down unattended, with a smell of charred paper. A figure hung from the branch of a nearby tree, an effigy that someone had tried to set on fire, but the fire had gone out, leaving the figure blackened and stinking, the pale square of paper pinned to its chest unreadable in the dark.

They'd made nearly half a circuit of the park before he found the first words, Fraser walking patiently beside him, no longer holding his arm, and he missed the touch ... but the words came at last, at first disjointed, reluctant, and then in a burst like a musket volley. He was surprised that it could be said so briefly.

Fraser made a small sound, a sort of soft grunt, as though he'd been punched in the belly, but then listened in silence. They walked for some time after Grey had finished speaking.

"Kyrie, eleison," Fraser said at last, very quietly. Lord, have mercy.

"Well enough for you," Grey said without rancor. "It must help, to think there is some ultimate sense to things."

Fraser turned his head to look at him curiously.

"Do ye not think so? Whether ye call the ultimate cause—or the ultimate effect, I suppose—God or merely Reason? I have heard ye speak with admiration of logic and reason."

"Where is the logic in this?" Grey burst out, flinging out his hands.

"Ye ken that as well as I do," Fraser said rather sharply. "The logic of duty, and what each man of us—you, me, and Edward Twelvetrees—conceived that to be."

"I—" Grey stopped, unable to formulate his thoughts coherently; there were too many of them.

"Aye, we're guilty of that man's death—the two of us, and dinna think I say so out of kindness. I ken well what ye mean—and what ye feel." Fraser stopped for a moment, turning to face Grey, his eyes intent. They stood outside the house of the Earl of Prestwick; the lanterns had been lit and the light fell through the wrought-iron bars of the fence, striping them both.

"I accused him of treason in public, to stop him executing actions that would have injured folk who are mine. He challenged me, to prevent any suspicion attaching to him, so that he could carry out his schemes, though they were not the schemes I—we—assumed him to have. You then challenged him, to—" He halted suddenly and stared hard at Grey. "Ostensibly," he said, more slowly, "ye challenged him to preserve your honor, to refute the slur of sodomy." His lips compressed into a tight line.

"Ostensibly," Grey echoed. "Why the bloody hell else would I have done it?"

Fraser's eyes searched his face. Grey felt the touch of the other man's gaze, an odd sensation, but kept his own face composed. Or hoped he did.

"Her Grace says that ye did it for the sake of your friendship with me," Fraser said at last, quietly. "And I am inclined to think her right."

"Her Grace should mind her own bloody business." Grey turned away abruptly and began walking. Fraser caught him up within a pace or two, bootheels muffled on the sandy path. Small forms darted in and out of the scattered light from the lanterns of the big houses: children, mostly, scavenging the piles of horse droppings left on the riding path.

Grey had noticed the nice distinction: "for the sake of your friendship with me," as opposed to the simpler—but far more threatening—"for me." He didn't know if the distinction was Minnie's or Fraser's, but supposed it didn't matter. Both

statements were true, and if Fraser preferred the greater distance of the former, he was welcome to it.

"We are both guilty in his death," Fraser repeated doggedly. "But so is he."

"How? He couldn't have suffered your accusation without response. And he couldn't have told you, even privately, what the truth of his position was."

"He could," Fraser corrected, "save that he saw it as his duty not to."

Grey looked at him blankly. "Of course."

Fraser turned his head away, but Grey thought he detected the glimmer of a smile among the shadows. "You *are* an Englishman," Fraser said dryly. "So was he. And had he not tried to kill ye at the last—"

"He had to," Grey interrupted. "His only other choice would have been to ask me to yield—and he knew bloody well I wouldn't."

Fraser gave a cursory nod of acknowledgment. "Did I not say it was logical?"

"You did. But ..." He let his voice trail away. In the enormity of his own regret, he hadn't paused to think that what Fraser said was true: he also had a share in Twelvetrees's death—and therefore in the regret.

"Aye, but," Fraser said with a sigh, "I would have done the same. But ye've killed men before, and likely better men than Twelvetrees."

"Quite possibly. But I killed them as—as enemies. From duty." Would it have come to this pass if not for Esmé and Nathaniel? Yes, likely it would.

"Ye killed him as an enemy, did ye not? The fact that he wasna one in fact is not your fault."

"That is a very specious argument."

"Doesna mean it's not true."

"Do you think you can argue me out of guilt? Out of horror and melancholy?" Grey demanded, annoyed.

"I do, aye. It isna possible to feel urgent emotion and engage in rational discourse at the same time."

"Oh, yes, it is," Grey began, with some warmth, but as it was that unfortunate conversation in the stable at Helwater that would have formed his prime example, he abandoned this tack. "Do you truly consider all impassioned speech to be illogical? What about the bloody Declaration of Arbroath?"

"A speech may be conceived in passion," Fraser conceded, "but it's executed in cold blood, for the most part. The declaration was written—or at least subscribed—by a number of men. They canna all have been in the grip of passion when they did it."

Grey actually laughed, though shortly, then shook his head.

"You are trying to distract me from the point at issue."

"No," said Fraser thoughtfully. "I think I am trying to lead ye to the point at issue—which is that no matter how much a man may try to do what is right, the outcome may not be one that he either foresees or desires. And that's grounds for regret—sometimes verra great regret," he added more softly, "but not for everlasting guilt. For it is there we must throw ourselves on God's mercy and hope to receive it."

"And you speak from experience." Grey had not meant this statement to sound challenging, but it did, and Fraser exhaled strongly through his long Scottish nose.

"I do," he said, after a moment's silence. He sighed. "When I was laird of Lallybroch, one of my tenants came to ask my help. She was an auld woman, concerned for one of her grandsons. His father beat him, she said, and she was feart that he would kill the lad. Would I not take him to be a stable-lad at my house?

"I said that I would. But when I spoke to the father, he'd have none of it and reproached me for tryin' to take his son away from him." He sighed again.

"I was young, and a fool. I struck him. In fact ... I beat him, and he yielded to me. I took the lad. Rabbie, his name was; Rabbie MacNab."

Grey gave a small start, but said nothing.

"Well. Ronnie—that was the father's name; he was Ronald MacNab, and his son, Rabbie—betrayed me to the Watch, out of his fury and bereavement, and I was arrested and taken to an English prison. I ... escaped ..." He hesitated, as though wondering whether to say more, but decided against it and went on. "But later, when I came back to Lallybroch in the early days of the Rising, I found MacNab's croft burnt out, and him gone up in smoke and ashes on his own hearthstone."

"I take it this was no accident?"

Fraser shook his head, the movement barely perceptible, as they were passing under the great row of elms along the east side of the park.

"No," he said softly. "My other tenants did it, for they kent well who had betrayed me. They did what seemed right—their duty to me—as I had done what seemed right and my duty as laird. And yet the end of it was death, and nothing I intended."

Their steps were soft, nearly shuffling as they walked more slowly.

"I take your point," Grey said at last, quietly. "What became of the boy? Rabbie?"

One large shoulder moved slightly.

"He lived in my house—he and his mother—during the Rising. Afterward ... my sister said he had made up his mind to go south, to see if he might find work, for there was nothing left in the Highlands for a young man, save the army, and that he wouldna do."

Greatly daring, Grey touched Jamie's arm, very gently.

"You said that a man cannot foresee the outcome of his actions, and that's true. But in this case, I can tell you one of

yours."

"What?" Fraser spoke sharply, whether from the touch or from Grey's words, but did not jerk away.

"Rabbie MacNab. I know what became of him. He is—or was, when last I saw him—a London chairman and contemplating marriage." He forbore to tell Fraser that Rab's intended was his acquaintance, Nessie, not knowing whether a Scotch Catholic's view of prostitution might be similar to that of a Scotch Presbyterian, who tended in Grey's experience to be rather rigid and censorious about the pleasures of the flesh.

Fraser's hand closed on his forearm, startling Grey considerably.

"Ye ken where he is?" Fraser's voice showed his excitement. "Can ye tell me where I might find him?"

Grey rummaged hastily through his scattered thoughts, trying to recall where Agnes had said: My new house ... The end o' Brydges Street... Mrs. Donoghue ...

"Yes," he said, feeling his spirit rise a little. "I can find him for you, I'm sure."

"I—thank ye, my lord," Jamie said abruptly.

"Don't call me that." John felt a little better but suddenly unutterably tired. "If we share blood guilt and remorse for what we did to that bastard Twelvetrees, you can for God's sake call me by my Christian name, can you not?"

Fraser paced in silence for a bit, thinking.

"I could," he said slowly. "For now. But I shall go back to—to my place, and it willna do then. I ... should find it disagreeable to become accustomed to such a degree of familiarity and then ..." He made a small, dismissive gesture.

"You needn't go back," Grey said, reckless. He had no power to commute Fraser's sentence nor pardon him and no business to suggest such a thing—not without Hal's assent. But he thought it could be done.

He'd shocked the Scot, he saw; Fraser drew a little away,

even as they walked together.

"I ... am much obliged to your lordship for the thought," he said at last. His voice sounded queer, Grey thought, and wondered why. "I ... even if it should be possible ... I—I do not wish to leave Helwater."

Grey misunderstood for a moment and sought to reassure him. "I do not mean you should be committed to prison again, nor even released to a new parole in London. I mean, in light of your great service to—to the government ... it might be possible to arrange a pardon. You could be ... free."

The word hung in the air between them, small and solid. Fraser drew a long, tremulous breath, but when he spoke, his words were firm.

"I take your meaning, my lord. And I am truly very much obliged for the kindness ye intend. But there is—I have ... someone ... at Helwater. Someone for whose sake I must return."

"Who?" Grey asked, very startled by this.

"Her name is Betty Mitchell. One of the lady's maids."

"Really," Grey said blankly, then, coming to the realization that this sounded very discourteous, hastened to make amends. "I—I congratulate you."

"Aye, well, ye needna do that just yet," Fraser said. "I havena spoken to her—formally, I mean. But there is ... what ye might call an understanding."

Grey felt rather as though he'd stepped on a garden rake which had leapt up and banged him on the nose. It was the last thing he would have expected—not only in light of the social differences that must exist between a lady's maid and a laird (though a brief thought of Hal and Minnie drifted through the back of his mind, together with a vision of the scorched hearth rug), no matter how far the laird's fortunes had fallen, but in light of what Grey had always assumed to be Fraser's very exigent feelings toward his dead wife.

He knew the lady's maid slightly, from his visits to

Helwater, and while she was a fine-looking young woman, she was distinctly ... well, common. Fraser's first wife had been distinctly uncommon.

"Christ, Sassenach. I need ye."

He felt shocked—and rather disapproving. He was more shocked still to realize this and did his best to dismiss the feeling; it wasn't his business to be shocked, and even if it were ... well, it had been a very long time since Fraser's wife had died, and he was a man. And an honorable one. Better to marry than burn, they say, he thought cynically. I wouldn't know.

"I wish you every happiness," he said, very formal. They had come to a stop near the Alexandra Gate. The night air was soft, full of the scent of tree sap and chimney smoke and the distant reeks of the city. He realized with a lesser shock that he felt very hungry—and, with a mingled sense of shame and resignation, that he was pleased to be alive.

They were more than late for supper.

"You'd best send for a tray," Grey said, as they climbed the marble steps. "I'll have to tell Hal what Bowles said, but there's no need for you to be involved any further. In any of this."

"Is there not?" Fraser looked at him, serious in the light of the lantern that hung by the door. "Ye'll be going to speak wi' Reginald Twelvetrees, will ye not?"

"Oh, yes." The thought of that necessity had been pushed to the back of his mind during the recent conversation but had not left him; it hung like a weight suspended by a spider's thread; Damocles' sword. "Tomorrow."

"I'll go with ye." The Scotsman's voice was quiet but firm. Grey heaved a deep sigh and shook his head.

"No. I thank you ... Mr. Fraser," he said, and tried to smile at the formality. "My brother will second me."



Teind

The Grey Brothers went the next morning to pay their call on Reginald Twelvetrees. They left, grim and silent, and came back the same way, Grey going out to the conservatory, Hal to his den of papers, speaking to no one.

Jamie had some sympathy for the Greys—and for the Twelvetrees brothers, come to that—and, finding his favorite chair in the library, took out his rosary and said a few decades for the eventual peace of all souls concerned. There were, after all, many situations that simply had to be handed over to God, as no human agency was capable of dealing with them.

He found himself losing his place, though, distracted by his memory of the Greys going off together, shoulder-toshoulder, to face what must be faced. And the thought of Reginald Twelvetrees, privately mourning two lost brothers.

He had lost his own brother very young; Willie had been eleven when he died of the smallpox—Jamie, six. He didn't think of Willie much, but the ache of his absence was always there, along with the other scars on his heart left when someone was torn away. He envied the Greys their possession of each other.

Thought of Willie, though, reminded him of another William, and his heart lifted a little with the thought. If life stole dear ones from you, sometimes it gave you others. Ian

Murray had become his blood brother after Willie died; sometime he would see Ian again, and meanwhile the knowledge of his presence in the world—looking after things at Lallybroch—was a true comfort. And his son ...

When this was over—and pray God it would be soon—he would see William again. Be with him. He might— "Sir."

At first, he didn't realize that it was himself the butler meant. But Nasonby repeated, "Sir," more insistently, and when he looked up, the butler presented his silver tray, upon which reposed a sheet of rough paper sealed with a daub of candle wax and marked with the print of a broad thumb.

He took it with a nod of thanks and, putting his rosary away, brought the letter upstairs to his room. By the rainy light from the window, he opened it and found a note penned with a careful elegance, much at odds with its crude materials.

Shéamais Mac Bhrian, the salutation read. The rest was in the Irish, too, but was simple enough for him to understand:

For the love of God and Mary and Patrick, come to me now.

Tobias Mac Gréagair,

of the Quinns of Portkerry

At the bottom of the page was drawn a neat line with several boxes perched atop it, and below it written "Civet Cat Alley." One of the boxes had an "X" marked through it.

An extraordinary feeling ran through him, a cold grue that fell over him like an icy blanket. This wasn't merely Quinn's usual drama—still less the intended mischief of his note denouncing Grey as a murderer. The simplicity of it, plus the fact that Quinn had signed it with his formal name, carried an undeniable urgency.

He was halfway down the stairs when he met Lord John, coming up.

"Where is Civet Cat Alley?" he asked abruptly. Grey blinked, glanced at the paper in Jamie's hand for an instant, then said, "In the Rookery—the Irish quarter. I've been there. Shall I take you?"

"I—" He started to say that he would go alone, but he knew nothing of London. If he went on foot, asking his way, it would take a great while. And he had a deep certainty that there was not a great while to spare.

He was prey to the most profound anxiety. Was Quinn threatened with imminent arrest? If so, he should certainly not take Grey to him, but ... Or it might be that the Jacobite plotters, learning that they were betrayed, had decided that it was Quinn who had betrayed them. Oh, Jesus. If that were the case—

Yet something in the dark cavern of his heart gave off a metallic echo, a note of doom, small and inexorable as the chime of Grey's pocket watch. Ticking off the moments of Quinn's life.

"Yes," he said abruptly. "Now."



Of course he had known, from the moment the note was put into his hand. But still, he urged the carriage on by force of will and, in Civet Cat Alley, went in to the house with heart hammering and scarcely able to breathe. He seized a young slattern with a baby in her arms in the first room he came to and demanded the whereabouts of Tobias Quinn.

"Upstairs," she said, affronted but frightened of his size and his ferocity. "The fourth floor back. What are ye wantin' wit' him?" she added in a bawl after him, but he was pounding up the stairs to what he knew was there, leaving Grey to deal with the gathering crowd of curious, half-hostile Irish who had followed the carriage through the streets.

The door was unlocked and the room orderly and peaceful,

save for the blood.

Quinn had lain down on his bed, fully clothed save for his coat, which was neatly folded at the foot of the bed, the checkered silk outermost. He had not cut his throat but had turned back his cuff with great care and cut his wrist, which dangled over the *Cupán*, set on the floor beneath. The blood had overflowed and run red across the sloping floor almost to the door, like an unfurled carpet laid for royalty. And neatly, as neatly as a man could print with a finger dipped in his own blood, he had written the word "TEIND" on the wall above his shabby cot. A tithe to hell.

Jamie stood, trying not to breathe, though his chest heaved with the need for air.

"May God rest his soul," said Grey's voice, quiet behind him. "Is that it? The cup?"

Jamie nodded, unable to speak for the glut of grief and guilt that filled him. Grey had come beside him, to look. He shook his head, gave a little sigh, and, saying, "I'll get Tom Byrd," left Jamie alone.



Sole Witness

Inchcleraun

Quinn could not be laid to rest in consecrated ground, of course. Still, Abbot Michael had offered the aid of some of the brothers for the burial. Jamie declined this offer—though with gratitude—and with the wooden coffin perched on the sledge that the monks used to fetch home peats from the moss-hag, he set off across the bog, a rope round his shoulder and his burden bumping and floating by turns behind him.

When they had reached the rocky small hill in the middle of the bog, he took up the wooden spade Brother Ambrose had given him and began to dig.

Sole witness, sole mourner. He had told the Grey brothers that he would come alone to Ireland to bury Quinn. They had looked at each other, their faces reflecting the same thought, and had made neither objection nor condition. They knew he would come back.

Others had seen the body, but he knew he was the sole true witness to Quinn's death. God knew he understood this death as few others could. Knew what it was to have lost the meaning of your life. Had God not bound him to the earth with the ties of flesh and blood, he might well have come to such an end himself. Might come to it now, were it not for those same ties.

The soil was rocky and hard-packed, but only for the first few inches. Below that was a rich, soft earth of lake silt and decayed peat moss, and the grave opened easily, deepening with the rhythm of his shoveling.

Teind. Which of them was it who was meant to be the tithe to hell? Quinn, or him? He supposed Quinn had meant himself, for surely he expected to go to hell, as a suicide. But the nagging thought recurred: Why leave the word written there in his blood? Was it confession ... or accusation? Surely if Quinn had known what Jamie had done, he would have written "fealltóir" Traitor. And yet the man was an Irishman, and therefore poetical by nature. "Teind" carried a good bit more weight, as a word, than did "fealltóir."

The day was warm, and after a bit he took off his breeches and a little later his shirt, working naked to the air, wearing nothing but sandals and a handkerchief bound round his brow to keep the sweat from running into his eyes. There was no one to see his scars, no one but Quinn, and he was welcome.

It was late when at last he'd made the grave square and seemly. Deep enough that the water began to seep into the hole at the bottom, deep enough that no digging fox would scrabble at the coffin lid. Would the coffin and the body rot at once? he wondered. Or would the dark-brown water of the bog preserve Quinn as it had once preserved the thrice-killed man with the gold ring on his finger?

He glanced up the slope at that other unmarked grave. At least Quinn would not lie alone.

He'd brought the cup, the *Cupán Druid riogh*. It lay wrapped in his cloak, awaiting restoration. To whom? Beyond asking whether the cup was the *Cupán Druid riogh*, Grey had never mentioned it again. Neither had the abbot asked after it. Jamie realized that the thing was given into his hands, to do with as he wished. The only thing he wished

was to get rid of it.

"Lord, let this cup pass away," he muttered, dragging the coffin to the lip of the grave. He gave it a tremendous shove and it shot forward, falling with a loud *crunk!* into the earth. The effort left him trembling, and he stood for a moment gasping, wiping his face with the back of his hand. He checked to see that the lid had not come off and that the coffin had not burst or turned sideways in its fall, and then once more took up the spade.

The sun was dropping toward the horizon, and he worked fast, not wanting to risk being stranded on the islet for the night. The air cooled, and the midges came out, and he paused to put his shirt on. The light came in low and flat now, gilding the drifting clouds, and the dark surface of the bog glimmered below like gold and jet. He took up the spade again, but before he could resume his shoveling, he heard a sound that made him turn round.

Not a bird, he thought, nor yet the abbey's bell. It was a sound he'd never heard before and yet somehow familiar. The bog had fallen silent; even the hum of the midges had ceased. He listened, but the sound did not repeat itself, and slowly he began to shovel again, pausing now and then, listening—for what, he did not know.

It came again as he had nearly finished. The grave lay neatly mounded, though with an opening at the head. He had it in mind to lay the cup there, let Quinn take the bloody thing to hell with him, if he liked. But as he lifted his cloak to unwrap the cup, twilight began to rise from the earth, and the sound came clear to him through the still air. A horn.

Horns. Like the blowing of trumpets, but trumpets such as he had never heard, and the hairs rippled on his body.

They're coming. He didn't pause to ask himself who it was that was coming but hastily put on his breeks and coat. It didn't occur to him to flee, and for an instant he wondered why not, for the very air around him quivered with strangeness.

Because they're not coming for you, the calm voice within his mind replied. Stand still.

They were in sight now, figures coming slowly out of the distance, taking shape as they came, as though they materialized from thin air. Which, he thought, was precisely what they'd just done.

There was no mist, no fog over the water. But the party coming toward him—men and women both, he thought—had come from nowhere, for there was nowhere from which to come; nothing lay behind them save a stretch of bog that reached clear to the shore of the lake beyond.

Again the horns sounded, a flat, discordant sound—would he know if they were tuneful? he wondered—and now he saw the horns themselves, curving tubes that caught the rays of the sinking sun and shone like gold. And it came to him what they sounded like: it was the honking of wild geese.

They were closer now, close enough to make out faces and the details of their clothing. They were dressed plain, for the most part, dressed in drab and homespun, save for one woman dressed in white—why is her skirt no spattered wi' the mud? And he saw with a little thrill of horror that her feet did not touch the ground; none of them did—who carried in one hand a knife with a long, curved blade and a glinting hilt. I must remember to tell Father Michael that it wasna a sword.

Now he saw another exception to the plain appearance of the crowd—for it was a crowd, thirty people at least. Following the woman came a tall man, dressed in simple knee-length breeks and bare-chested but with a cloak made in a checkered weave. The tall man wore a rope around his neck, and Jamie gulped air as though he felt the noose tighten around his own throat.

What were the names Father Michael had told him?

"Esus," he said, not aware that he spoke aloud. "Taranis.

Teutates." And, like clockwork, one man's head turned toward him, then another—and finally the woman looked at him.

He crossed himself, invoking the Trinity loudly, and the older gods turned their gaze away. One, he saw now, carried a maul.

He'd always wondered about Lot's wife and how it was that she turned to a pillar of salt, but now he saw how that could be. He watched, frozen, as the horns blew a third time and the crowd came to a stop, hovering a few inches above the glimmering surface of the bog, and formed a circle around the tall man—he stood a head taller than anyone else, and now the sun lit his hair with a gleam of fire. The woman in white came near, lifting her blade, the man with the maul moved ceremoniously behind the tall man, and a third reached for the end of the rope round his neck.

"No!" Jamie shouted, suddenly released from his captive spectatorship. He drew back his arm and hurled the *Cupán* as hard as he could, into the midst of the eerie crowd. It hit the bog with a splash, and the people vanished.

He blinked, then squinted against the glare of the setting sun. Nothing moved on the surface of the silent bog, and no bird sang. With the sudden energy of a madman, he seized his spade and shoveled dirt furiously, tamped it down, and then, catching up his cloak under his arm, ran, water splashing from his sandals as he found the wooden causeway, half-submerged.

Behind him, he thought he heard the echo of wild geese calling and, despite himself, looked back.

There they were, now walking away, backs turned to him, into the face of the setting sun, and no glinting sight of the curving horns. But he thought he saw the flash of checkered cloth in the crowd. It might have been the tall man's cloak. It must only be a trick of the fading light that made the checkered cloth glow pink.

SECTION V



Succession



Redux

They didn't talk much on the way to Helwater. Tom was with them, of course—but beyond that, there wasn't much that could be said.

It was early autumn, but the weather had been foul. Pouring rain turned the roads to mud, and wind lashed the leaves from the trees, so they were either damp or soaked to the skin, plastered with mud, but absurdly spangled with gaudy blots of red and gold. They came to each inn at night shaken with cold, blue-lipped, and wanting nothing save warmth and food.

They shared a room, never a bed. If there were not beds enough, Jamie slept on the floor with Tom, wrapped in his cloak. John would have liked to lie in the darkness, listening to them breathe, but fatigue usually overwhelmed him the moment he lay down.

He felt almost as though he were escorting Jamie to his execution. While Fraser would of course continue to live—in contentment, he hoped—their arrival at Helwater would be the death of the relationship that had grown up between them. They could no longer behave as equals.

They would speak now and then, he supposed; they had, before. But it would be the stiff, formal conversation of gaoler and prisoner. And infrequent.

I'll miss you, John thought, watching the back of Jamie's

head as the Scot negotiated a plunging slope ahead of him, leaning far back in the saddle, red plait swinging as the horse picked its way, slewing and skittering through the mud. He wondered, a little wistfully, whether Jamie would likewise miss their conversations—but knew better than to dwell on the thought.

He clicked his tongue, and his horse began the last descent to Helwater.

The drive was long and winding, but as they came into the last turn, he saw several well-bundled figures taking the air on the lawn, all women: Lady Dunsany and Isobel, and with them a couple of maid-servants. Peggy the nurse-maid, with William in her arms ... and Betty Mitchell.

Beside him, he felt Fraser stiffen, rising slightly in his saddle at the sight. Grey's heart contracted suddenly, feeling the Scot's sudden surge of eagerness.

His choice, he reminded himself silently, and followed his prisoner back into captivity.



Hanks was dead.

"Quicker than he deserved, the sod," Crusoe observed dispassionately. "Slipped going down the ladder one morning and broke his neck. We picked him up dead." Crusoe gave Jamie a sidelong glance; it was plain that he wasn't sure how he felt about Jamie's reappearance. On the one hand, Crusoe couldn't handle all the work himself, or even half of it, and Jamie needed no training. On the other ... with Hanks dead, Jamie might take over as head groom, and Crusoe might well fear the consequences of that.

"God rest his soul," Jamie said, and crossed himself. He'd let the question of who was to be head groom bide for now. If Crusoe could handle the responsibilities, he was welcome to them. If not ... time enough to deal with that later.

"I'll take Eugenie's string out, then, aye?" he said, casual. Crusoe nodded, a little unsure, and Jamie went up the ladder to the loft, to leave his sack of belongings.

He'd come back better clothed than he left; his shirt and breeks were still rough, but new, and he had three pair of woolen stockings in his sack, a good leather belt, and a slouch hat of black felt—the latter, a gift from Tom Byrd. He disposed these items in the box that stood beside his pallet, checking as he did so to see that the things he had left in it were still there.

They were. The little statue of the Virgin that his sister had sent him, a dried mole's foot, to be carried against the rheumatism—he took that out and put it in the small goatskin pouch at his waist; his right knee had begun to ache on wet mornings, since Ireland—the stub of a pencil, a tinderbox, and a chipped pottery candlestick, an inch of melted wax still in it. A scatter of stones, picked up because of their feel in the hand or a pretty color. He counted them; there were eleven: one each for his sister, for Ian, for Young Jamie, Maggie, Kitty, Janet, Michael, and Young Ian; one for his daughter, Faith, who had died at birth; another for the child Claire had carried when she went; the last—a piece of rough amethyst-for Claire herself. He must look out for another now: the right stone for William. He wondered briefly why he had not done that before. Because he hadn't felt the right to claim William even in the privacy of his own heart, he supposed.

He was pleased, if surprised, to find his things intact. It might be only that there was nothing there worth the taking, of course. Or it might be that they expected him to come back and were afraid to tamper with his box. Someone *had* taken his blanket, he saw.

His most intimate keepsake was one that could not be lost or stolen, though. He flexed his left hand, where the thin white line of the letter "C"—carved a little crookedly, but still perfectly legible—showed on the mound at the base of his thumb. The "J" he had left on her would be likewise still visible, he supposed. He hoped.

One more thing to be put away. He took the heavy little purse from the bottom of the bag and tucked it under the balled-up stockings, then closed the box and went down the ladder, surefooted as a goat.

For now Jamie was surprised at the sense of peace he felt in the stable. It wasn't homecoming, precisely—this place would never be home to him—but it was a place he knew, familiar in its daily rhythms, and with open air and the calm sweet presence of the horses always there at the bottom of it, no matter what the people were like.

He took his string of horses out along the road past the mere, then up a little way—not onto the fells but beyond the outer paddocks, where a grassy track led the way up and over a series of small hills. He paused at the summit of the highest, to breathe the horses and to look down over Helwater. It was a view he liked, when the weather was clear enough to see it: the big old house couched comfortably in its grove of copper beeches, the silver of the water beyond, rippling in the wind, its lacy edging of cattails spattered with blackbirds in spring and summer, their clear high song reaching him if the breeze lay right.

Just now there were no birds visible save a small hawk circling below the crest of the hill, alert for mice in the dead grass. There were tiny figures coming out along the drive, though; two men, mounted—Lord Dunsany and Lord John. He recognized the first by his stooped shoulders and the way his head jutted forward, the second by his square, solid seat and his easy, one-handed way with the reins.

"God be with ye, Englishman," he said. Whatever John Grey had thought of Jamie's announcement that he meant to court Betty Mitchell—Jamie grinned to himself at memory of Lord John's face, comically trying to suppress his

astonishment in the name of courtesy—he'd brought Jamie back to Helwater.

Grey would leave in a few days, he supposed. He wondered if they would speak again before that happened, and, if so, how. The odd half-friendship they had forged from necessity could not in justice be forgotten—but neither could the resumption of their present positions as, essentially, master and slave. Was there any ground that would let them meet again as equals?

"A posse ad esse," he muttered to himself. From possibility to actuality. And, gathering up his leading rein, shouted, "Hup!" to the horses, and they thundered happily down the hill toward home.



The day was cold and windy but bright, and leaves from the copper beeches flew past in wild flurries, as though pursued. Grey had worried momentarily when Dunsany suggested a ride, for the old man was very frail, noticeably more so than on Grey's last visit. The giddy flights of sun, wind, and leaves lent the day a sense of mild excitement, though, which seemed to communicate itself to Dunsany, for his face took on a faint glow and his hands seemed strong enough on the reins. Nonetheless, Grey took care to keep their pace moderate and one eye on his ancient friend.

Once out of the drive, they took the lake road. It was muddy—Grey had never known it not—and the churned earth showed numerous hoof hollows slowly filling with water; a number of horses had passed this way not long before. Grey felt the small spurt of excitement that he had been experiencing whenever horses or stables were mentioned at Helwater—a more or less hourly occurrence—though he knew that encountering Jamie Fraser out with a horse was a long shot, there being other grooms on the

estate. Still, he couldn't help a quick glance ahead.

The road lay empty before them, though, and he bent his attention to Lord Dunsany, who had slowed his horse to a walk.

"Has he picked up a stone?" he asked, reining in and preparing to dismount and attend to it.

"No, no." Dunsany waved him back into his saddle. "I wished to talk with you, Lord John. Privately, you know."

"Oh. Yes, of course," he said, cautiously. "Er ... about Fraser?"

Dunsany looked surprised, but then considered.

"Well, no. But since you mention him, do you wish to ... make other arrangements for him?"

Grey bit the inside of his cheek. "No," he said carefully. "Not for the present."

Dunsany nodded, not seeming bothered at the prospect. "He's a very good groom," he said. "The other servants don't make things easy for him—well, they wouldn't, would they? —but he keeps much to himself."

"He keeps much to himself." Those casual words gave Grey a sudden insight into Fraser's life at Helwater—and a slight pang. Had he not kept Fraser from transportation, he would have remained in the company of the other Scots, would have had companionship.

If he hadn't died of seasickness, he thought, and the pang faded, to be replaced by another moment of insight. Was this the explanation for Fraser's decision to marry Betty Mitchell?

Grey knew Betty fairly well; she'd been Geneva Dunsany's lady's maid since Geneva's childhood and, with Geneva's death, had become Isobel's maid. She was quick-witted, good-looking in a common way, and seemed to be popular with the other servants. With her as wife, Jamie would be much less strange to the Helwater servants, much more a part of their community.

Little as Grey liked that idea, he had to admit that it was a

sensible way of dealing with isolation and loneliness. But—His thoughts were abruptly jerked back to Dunsany.

"You—I beg your pardon, sir. I didn't quite hear ...?" He'd heard, all right; he just didn't believe it.

"I said," Dunsany repeated patiently, leaning closer and raising his voice, "that I propose to amend my will and wish to ask your permission to add a provision appointing you as guardian to my grandson, William."

"I—well ... yes. Yes, of course, if you wish it." Grey felt as though he'd been struck behind the ear with a stocking full of sand. "But surely there are other men much better qualified for the office. A male relative—someone on William's father's side of the family?"

"There really is no one," Dunsany said, with a helpless, one-shouldered shrug. "There are no male relations at all; only a couple of distant female cousins, neither of them married. And there is no one in my own family who is near enough, either in terms of geography or degree of relation, to make a competent guardian. I would not have the boy shipped off to Halifax or Virginia."

"No, of course not," Grey murmured, wondering how to get out of this. He could see why Dunsany wanted to amend his will; the old man was feeling his years, and with good reason. He was ill and frail and might easily be carried off by the winter's chills. It would be irresponsible to die without providing for William's guardianship. But the possible imminence of Dunsany's demise also meant that Grey's putative guardianship had an uncomfortable immediacy, as well.

"Besides not wanting to uproot the child so drastically—and my wife and Isobel would be quite desolate without him—he is the heir to Ellesmere. He has considerable property here; he should be raised with a knowledge of it."

"Yes, I see that." Grey pulled his horse's head away from the clump of grass it was nosing after. "I know this is gross presumption on my part," Dunsany said, perceiving his hesitation. "And doubtless you were not expecting such a request. Should you like time to consider it?"

"I—no." Grey made up his mind on the moment. He hadn't seen that much of William but did like the little boy. While he was small, he wouldn't need that much in the way of help; Lady Dunsany and Isobel could care for him very well, and Grey could stay longer on his visits to Helwater. As William grew older ... he'd need to go to school, of course. He could divide his holidays, perhaps, coming with John to London sometimes, the two of them coming to Helwater.

Just as he had once come with his friend Gordon Dunsany. When Gordon had been killed at Culloden, Grey had come then alone, to grieve and to comfort. Over time, he had become not Gordon's replacement, of course, but almost an adopted son of the house. It was that intimacy that had allowed him to make his arrangements with Dunsany for Fraser's parole. And if a son had privileges within his family, he had also responsibilities.

"I'm most honored by your request, sir. I promise you, I will execute the office to the very best of my ability."

Dunsany's withered face lighted with relief.

"Oh, you relieve my mind exceedingly, Lord John! I confess, the matter has been pressing upon me to a terrible degree." He smiled, looking much healthier. "Let us finish our ride and then go back for our tea; I believe I shall have an appetite for the first time in months!"

Grey smiled back and accepted the old baronet's hand on the bargain, then followed him as they sped up to a canter past the ruffled waves of the mere. Movement in the distance caught his eye, and he saw a string of horses running down the slope of a distant hill, graceful and wild as a flurry of leaves, led by a horseman.

It was too far to be sure, but he was sure, nonetheless. He

couldn't take his eyes off the distant horses until they had rounded the bottom of the slope and disappeared.

Only then did his interrupted chain of thought restring itself. Yes, marrying Betty would make Jamie Fraser more comfortable at Helwater—but he need not stay at Helwater; it had been his choice to return. So it must in fact be Betty that drew him back.

"Well, bloody hell," Grey muttered. "It's his life." He spurred up, passing Dunsany on the road.



Jamie was surprised at how quickly Helwater reabsorbed him, though he supposed he shouldn't have been. A farm—and Helwater was a working farm, for all its grand manor house—has a life of its own, with a great, slow-beating heart, and everything on a farm listens to that beat and lives to its rhythm.

He knew that, for the rhythm of Lallybroch was deep in his bones, always would be. That knowledge was both sorrow and comfort, but more of the latter, for he knew that should he ever go back, that familiar heartbeat would still be there.

... and his place shall know him no more, the Bible said. He didn't think that was exactly what was meant; his place would always know him, should he come again.

But he would not come to Lallybroch again for a long time. *If ever*, he thought, but quickly put that thought out of his head. He turned his ear to the ground and felt the beating of Helwater, a quicker sound, one that would support him in his weakness, comfort him in loneliness. He could hear the speaking of its waters and the growing of the grass, the movement of horses and the silence of its rocks. The people were part of it—a more transient part, but not an unimportant part. And one of those was Betty Mitchell.

It couldn't be put off. And one benefit of the inexorable

daily rhythm of a farm was that the people were part of it. He lingered for a moment after breakfast, to speak to Kerenhappuch, the middle-aged Welsh kitchen maid, who liked him in a reserved, thin-lipped, dour sort of way. She was deeply religious, Keren—as evidenced by her name—thought him a Roman heretic, and wouldn't stand for carryings-on in any case, but when he told her that he had come back with news for Betty of a kinsman, she was willing to take his message. Everyone would know, of course, but under the circumstances, that wouldn't matter. At least he hoped not.

And so in the quiet part of the afternoon, an hour before tea, he came to the kitchen garden and found Betty waiting.

She turned at his step, and he saw that she'd put on a clean fichu and a little silver brooch. She lifted her chin and looked at him under her straight dark brows, a woman not quite sure of her power but clearly thinking she had some. He must be careful.

"Mrs. Betty," he said, bowing his head to her, formal. She had stretched out her hand, and he was obliged to take it but was careful not to squeeze or breathe on it.

"I came to tell ye about Toby," he said at once, before she could say anything. She blinked and her gaze sharpened, but she left her hand in his.

"Toby Quinn? What's happened to him, then?"

"He's died, lass. I'm sorry for it."

Her fingers curled over his and she gripped his hand.

"Died! How?"

"In the service of his king," he said. "He's buried safe in Ireland."

She was plainly shocked but gave him a sharp look.

"I said how. Who killed him?"

I did, he thought, but said, "He died by his own hand, lass," and said again, "I'm sorry for it."

She let go his hand and, turning, walked blindly for a few steps, put out her hand, and held tight to one of the espaliered pear trees that stood against the garden wall, spindly and vulnerable without its leaves.

She stood for some minutes, holding on to the branch, head bowed, breathing with a thickness in the sound. He'd thought she was fond of the man.

"Were you with him?" she said at last, not looking at him.

"If I had been, I should have stopped him."

She turned round then, lips pressed tight.

"Not then. Were you with him when you ... went away?" Her fingers fluttered briefly.

"Yes. Some of the time."

"The soldiers who took you—did they catch him?"

"No." He understood what she was asking: whether it was the prospect of captivity, transportation, or hanging that had made Toby do it.

"Then why?" she cried, fists curling. "Why would he do it?"

He swallowed, seeing again the tiny dark room and smelling blood and excrement. Seeing "Teind" on the wall.

"Despair," he said quietly.

She made a small huffing sound, shaking her head doggedly to and fro.

"He was a Papist. Despair's a sin to a Papist, isn't it?"

"Folk do a great many things they think are sins."

She made a little noise through her nose.

"Yes, they do." She stood for a moment staring at the stones in the walk, then looked up suddenly at him, fierce. "I don't understand at all how he could have—what made him despair?"

Oh, God. Guide my tongue.

"Ye ken he was a Jacobite, aye? Well, there was a plot he was involved in—a great matter, with great consequences, did it either fail or succeed. It failed, and the heart went out o' the man."

She let out her breath in a sigh that sank her shoulders,

seeming to deflate before his eyes. She shook her head.

"Men," she said flatly. "Men are fools."

"Aye, well ... ye're no wrong there," he said ruefully, hoping that she would not ask whether he had been involved in the great matter—or why the soldiers had taken him to start with.

He needed to go before the conversation became personal. She took his hand again, though, holding it between both of hers, and he could see that she was about to say something he didn't want her to say. He'd shifted his weight, about to pull loose, when he heard footsteps on the walk behind him, heavy and quick.

"What's going on here?" Sure enough, it was Roberts, face flushed and lowering. Jamie could have kissed the man.

"I brought sad news to Mistress Betty," he said quickly, taking back his hand. "The death of a kinsman."

Roberts looked back and forth between them, clearly suspicious, but Betty's air of shock and desolation was unfeigned and obvious. Roberts, who was not, after all, a stupid man, went rapidly to her, taking her by the arm and bending solicitously down to her.

"Are you all right, my dear?"

"I—yes. It's only ... oh, poor Toby!"

Betty was not stupid, either, and burst into tears, burying her face in Roberts's shoulder.

Jamie, being the third wise party present, silently praised God and backed hastily away, murmuring inconsequent regrets.

The wind was cold outside the shelter of the kitchen garden, but he was sweating. He made his way back toward the stables, nodding to Keren-happuch, who was standing outside the kitchen garden, holding a vegetable basin and waiting patiently for the godless behavior inside the walls to cease.

"A death, was it?" she said, having obviously come along

to ensure that his aim had not been wicked canoodling, after all.

"A sad death. Would ye say a prayer, maybe, for the soul of Tobias Quinn?"

A look of surprised distaste crossed her face.

"For a Papist?" she said.

"For a poor sinner."

She pushed out her thin lips, considering, but reluctantly nodded. "I suppose so."

He nodded, touched her shoulder in thanks, and went on his way.

The Church did call despair a sin, and suicide an unforgivable sin, as the sinner could not repent. A suicide was therefore condemned to hell, and prayers thus useless. But neither Keren nor Betty was a Papist, and perhaps their Protestant prayers might be heard.

For himself, he prayed each night for Quinn. After all, he reasoned, it couldn't hurt.



The Fog Comes Down

Bowness-on-Windermere was a small, prosperous town, with a maze of narrow stone-paved streets clustered cozily in the town center, these spreading out into a gentle slope of scattered houses and cottages that ran down to the lake's edge, where a fleet of little fishing boats swayed at anchor. It was a considerable coach ride from Helwater, and Lord Dunsary apologized for the effort required, explaining that his solicitor chose to live here, having left the London stews for what he assumed to be the bucolic pleasures of the country.

"Little did he know what sorts of things go on in the country," Dunsany said darkly.

"What sorts of things?" Grey asked, fascinated.

"Oh." Dunsany seemed mildly taken aback at being thus challenged, but furrowed his brow in thought, his cane tapping gently on the stones as he limped slowly toward the street where the solictor's office lay.

"Well, there was Morris Huckabee and his wife—only it seemed she was, in fact, his daughter. And her daughter was in fact not Morris's at all but born to the ostler at the Grapes, as the mother admitted in court. Now, ordinarily, the wife inherit—old Morris had died, you precipitating the trouble—but the question arose: was a common-law marriage (for of course the old creature had

never gone through with a proper marriage, just told everyone she was his wife, and no one thought to ask for details) based on an incestuous relationship valid? Because if it wasn't, you see, then the daughter—the wife daughter, I mean, not the daughter of the wife—couldn't inherit his estate.

"Now, under those circumstances, the money would then normally pass to the child or children of the marriage, save that in this case, the child—the younger daughter—wasn't really Morris's, and while in law, any child born in wedlock is considered to be the child of that marriage, regardless of whether he or she was really fathered by the butcher or the baker or the candlestick maker, in *this* case ..."

"Yes, I see," Grey said hastily. "Dear me."

"Yes, it was quite a revelation to Mr. Trowbridge," Dunsany said, with a grin that showed he still had the majority of his teeth, if somewhat worn and yellowed with age. "I think he considered selling up and going straight back to London, but he stuck it out."

"Trowbridge? I thought your solicitor was a Mr. Wilberforce."

"Oh," Dunsany said again, but less happily. "He was, indeed. Still is, for matters of conveyancing. But I did not quite like to employ him for this particular matter, you know."

Grey did not know, but nodded understandingly.

Dunsany sighed and shook his head.

"I do worry about poor Isobel," he said.

"You do?" Grey thought he must have missed some remark that established a relationship in the conversation between Mr. Wilberforce and Isobel, but—

"Oh!" Grey exclaimed himself. He'd forgotten that Lady Dunsany had said that Mr. Wilberforce was paying considerable *attention* to Isobel—this remark being made in a significant tone that made it clear that Lady Dunsany had her doubts about Wilberforce.

"Yes, I see." And he did. They were visiting the solicitor for the purpose of adding the new provision to Dunsany's will, establishing Lord John's guardianship of William. If Mr. Wilberforce had aspirations to Isobel's hand in marriage, the last thing Lord Dunsany would want was for the lawyer to be familiar with the provisions of his will.

"Her sister's marriage was so—" Dunsany's lips disappeared into the wrinkles of his face, so hard pressed were they. "Well. I have concerns, as I say. Still, that is neither here nor there. Come, Lord John, we must not be late."



It was a rare and beautiful day, one last warm breath of what the local people called "St. Martin's summer," before the chill rains and fogs of autumn fell like a curtain over the fells. Even so, Crusoe looked sourly up toward the distant rocks and rolled an eye at the sky.

"Something's coming," he said. "Feel it in me bones." He straightened his back with an alarming crack, as though to make the point, and groaned.

Jamie surreptitiously flexed his right hand. He also frequently felt weather coming; the badly mended bones seemed to have odd spaces that cold crept into. He felt nothing now, but he wasn't going to call Crusoe a liar.

"Aye, it might be," he said equably. "But Miss Isobel and Lady Dunsany are wanting to take Master Willie up to the old shepherd's hut for a wee wander." Having heard the screams and roarings from the nursery as he passed under its windows after breakfast, he had the impression that the proposed outing was the outcome of a domestic counsel of desperation.

According to kitchen gossip, Master William had a new

tooth coming, a back tooth, and it was coming hard—particularly for those who had to deal with him. Opinion was divided as to the best treatment for this ailment, some advising a leech upon the gums, some bleeding, others a poultice of hot mustard at the back of the neck. Jamie supposed that all these things would at least distract the child from his suffering by giving him something else to roar about but would himself have rubbed the lad's gums with whisky.

"Use enough of it," his sister had told him, a practiced finger in his new niece's squalling mouth, "and they'll go quiet. It helps to take a wee dram for yourself, too, in case they don't." He smiled briefly at the memory.

Isobel, though, had evidently decided that an outing would take Willie's mind off his tooth and had sent word for horses and a groom. Lady Dunsany, Lady Isobel, Betty—old Nanny Elspeth had flatly refused to countenance getting on a horse, and Peggy had a bad leg, so Betty had been dragooned to mind the child, and Jamie wished her well of that job—Mr. Wilberforce, and Jamie himself would complete the party.

Jamie wondered what Lady Isobel would say when she found that he was to escort the party, but he was too pleased with the prospect of seeing Willie—roaring or not—for a few hours to worry about it.

In the event, Lady Isobel seemed barely to notice his presence. She was flushed and cheerful, doubtless because of lawyer Wilberforce's presence, though her gaiety had a strange edge to it. Even Lady Dunsany, most of her attention fixed on Willie, noticed Isobel's mood and smiled a little.

"You're in good spirits, daughter," she said.

"Who could not be?" Isobel said, throwing back her head dramatically and raising her face to the sun. "So intoxicating a day!"

It was a fine day. A sky you could fall into, and never mind how far. The copper beeches near the house had gone to gold and rust, and a sweet, nippy little breeze whirled the fallen leaves round in skittish circles. Jamie remembered another day with air like blue wine, and Claire in it.

Lord, that she may be safe. She and the child. For an odd moment, he felt as though he stood outside himself, outside time, sensing Claire's hand warm on his arm, her smile as she looked at Willie—red-faced, tearstained, and obviously miserable, but still his bonnie wee lad.

Then the world snapped into place, and he picked up the boy to set him on Betty's saddle. William kicked him in the stomach, scrunched his face, and howled.

"NOOooooo! Don't want her, don't want HER, wanna ride with YOUuuu, Mac!"

Jamie tucked Willie under one arm, so that his sturdy legs churned harmlessly in the air, and looked to the ladies for advice, one eyebrow raised.

Betty looked as though she would prefer to share her horse with a wildcat but didn't say anything. Lady Dunsany glanced dubiously from the maidservant to Jamie, but Lady Isobel—her conversation with Mr. Wilberforce interrupted—drew up her reins and said impatiently, "Oh, let him."

And so they rode up toward the fells, skirting the moss, though at this time of year it was dry and mostly safe. Willie was breathing thickly through his mouth, his nose being blocked from crying, and was drooling now and then, but Jamie found his small, solid presence a pleasure, though he was disturbed to find that the boy was wearing a corset under his shirt.

As soon as the party reached a place where the horses were not compelled to follow one another, he maneuvered his own mount so as to drop back and ride beside Betty, who affected not to notice him.

"Is the wean not ower-young to be trussed up like a Christmas goose?" he asked bluntly.

Betty blinked at him, taken by surprise.

"Like ... Oh, you mean the corset? It's only a light thing, barely any boning. He won't have a real one 'til he's five, but his grandmother and his aunt thought he might as well grow used to it now. While they can still overpower him," she added in an undertone, with an unwilling twitch of amusement. "The little bugger kicked a hole in the wall of the nursery yesterday and broke six of the best teacups the day before. Stole them off the table and flung them against the wall to hear them smash, laughing all the time. He'll be a right devil when he's grown, you mark my words," she said, nodding at William, who had a thumb in his mouth and was dreamily lost in the horse's motion and the soothing proximity of Jamie's body.

Jamie contented himself with a neutral sound in his throat, though he felt his ears grow hot. They would not discipline the boy, and yet they meant to case his sweet small body in linen and whalebone, to narrow his shoulders and sway his back to meet the demands of what they thought fashionable?

He knew that the custom of corseting children was common among the wealthy English—to form their bodies into the slope-shouldered, high-chested figure thought most fashionable—but such things were not done in the Highlands, save perhaps among the nobles. The odious garment—he could feel the hard edge of it pressing into Willie's soft flesh, just below his oxter—made Jamie want to spur up and ride hell-bent for the Border, pausing only to strip the thing off and throw it into the mere as they passed.

But he couldn't do that and so rode on, one arm tight around William, seething.

"He's selling," Betty murmured, distracting him from his dark thoughts, "but Lady D's not buying. Poor Isobel!"

"Eh?"

She nodded and he looked ahead, seeing Mr. Wilberforce riding between the two ladies, now and then casting a quick,

possessive glance at Isobel but turning the most of his winsome charm on Lady Dunsany. Who, as Betty said, seemed less than overwhelmed.

"Why poor Isobel?" Jamie asked, watching this byplay with interest.

"Why, she's sweet on him, you great nit. Surely even you can see that?"

"Aye, so?"

Betty sighed and rolled her eyes dramatically but was sufficiently bored as to put aside her pose of disinterest.

"So," she said, "Lady Isobel wants to marry him. Well," she added fairly, "she wants to be married, and he's the only one in the county that's halfway presentable. But only halfway, and I don't think that'll be enough," she said, squinting judiciously at Wilberforce, who was nearly falling out of his saddle in the effort to pay a compliment to Lady Dunsany, who was pretending to be hard of hearing.

On Wilberforce's other side, Isobel was glaring at her mother, with a look of mingled frustration and apprehension on her face. Lady Dunsany rode tranquilly, rocking a little on her sidesaddle, glancing vaguely at Wilberforce's importunate face from time to time, with an expression that said plainly, "Oh, are you still here?"

"Why do they not like him for their daughter, then?" Jamie asked, interested despite himself. "Do they not wish her to be married?"

Betty snorted. "After what happened to Geneva?" she asked, and looked pointedly at William, then raised her face to Jamie, with a tiny smirk. He kept his own face carefully blank, despite a lurch of the innards, and did not reply.

They rode in silence for a bit, but Betty's innate restlessness would not tolerate silence for long.

"They'd let her marry *well*, I s'pose," she said, grudging. "But they don't mean to let her throw herself away on a lawyer. And one that's talked about, too."

"Aye? What's said about him?" Jamie didn't give a fig for Wilberforce—and not much more for Lady Isobel—but the conversation took his mind off Willie's corset.

Betty pursed her lips, with a knowing, sly sort of look.

"They say he spends a good bit of time with his clients what are ladies with no husbands—more than he needs to. And he lives beyond his means," she added primly. "Well beyond."

That was likely the more serious charge, Jamie reflected. He supposed that Isobel had a decent portion. She was the Dunsanys' only remaining child, though of course William would inherit the estate.

As they climbed the path to the old shepherd's hut, he felt a tightening of the belly, but there was no sign of anyone, and he gave a small sigh of relief and said a quick prayer for the repose of Quinn's soul. A basket had been brought, with a roast chicken, a loaf, some good cheese and a bottle of wine. Willie, emerging from his daze, was irascible and whiny, rejecting all offers of food. Mr. Wilberforce, in an attempt at ingratiation, ruffled the boy's hair and tried to jolly him out of his sulks, being severely bitten in the hand for his pains.

"Why, you little—" The lawyer's face went red, but he wisely coughed and said, "You poor little child. How sorry I am that you should be so miserable!"

Jamie, his face kept carefully straight, happened to catch Lady Dunsany's eye at this point, and they exchanged a glance of perfect understanding. Had it lasted more than an instant, one or both of them would have burst into laughter, but Lady Dunsany looked away, coughed, and reached for a napkin, which she offered to the lawyer.

"Are you bleeding, Mr. Wilberforce?" she inquired sympathetically.

"William!" said Isobel. "That is very wicked! You must apologize to Mr. Wilberforce this minute."

"No," said William briefly, and, plumping down on his backside, turned his attention to a passing beetle.

Isobel hovered in indecision, plainly not wanting to appear before the lawyer as anything other than the personification of womanly gentleness and not sure how to reconcile this desire with the equally plain urge to clout Willie over the ear. Mr. Wilberforce begged her to sit down and have a glass of wine, though, and Betty—with a deep sigh of resignation—went to crouch beside William and distract him with plucked blades of grass, showing him how to chivvy the hapless beetle to and fro.

Jamie had the horses hobbled, grazing on the short turf beyond the ruined hut. They needed no attention, but he took the bread and cheese Cook had given him for the journey and went to look at them, enjoying a moment's solitude.

He must be careful not to spend too much time in watching William, lest his fascination show, and he sat down on the ruined wall, back turned to the party—though he was unable to avoid hearing the stramash that broke out when William put the doomed beetle up his nose and then shrieked at the result.

The unfortunate Betty came in for a dreadful scolding, all three of the others reproaching her at once. The clishmaclaver was made worse by William, who started roaring again, apparently wanting the beetle put back.

"Go away!" Isobel shouted at Betty. "Go right away to the house; you're no use at all!"

Jamie's mouth was full of bread and cheese, and he nearly choked when Betty broke away from the group and ran toward him, sobbing.

"Horse," she said, her bosom heaving. "Get my horse!"

He rose at once and fetched her animal, swallowing the last of his meal.

"Did they—" he began, but she didn't stay for question or

comfort but put her foot in his offered hand and swung into the saddle in a furious flurry of petticoats. She lashed the startled horse across the neck with the end of the rein, and the poor beast shot down the trail as though its tail was on fire.

The others were fussing over William, who seemed to have lost his mind and had no idea what he wanted, only that he didn't want whatever he was offered. Jamie turned round and walked up the fell, out of earshot. The wean would wear himself out soon enough—and sooner if they'd leave him be.

Up higher, there was no shelter from the wind, and its soft, high whistle drowned the noise from below. Looking down, he could see William curled up in a ball beside his auntie, with his jacket over his head, his breeches filthy, and the damned corset almost round his neck. He looked deliberately away and saw Betty, halfway across the moss. His mouth tightened. He hoped the horse wouldn't step into one of the boggy spots and break a leg.

"Wee gomerel," he muttered, shaking his head. Despite their history, he felt a bit sorry for Betty. He was also curious about her.

She hadn't been friendly to him today, not quite that. But she'd spoken to him with more intimacy than she'd ever shown before. He would have expected her to ignore him, or be short with him, after what had passed between them. But no. Why was that?

"She wants to be married," the lass had said of Isobel. Perhaps Mrs. Betty did, as well. She was the age for it, or a wee bit beyond. He'd thought—and blushed at his presumption—that she only wanted to bed him, whether out of lewdness or curiosity, he couldn't tell. He was nearly sure that she knew about Geneva and him. But what if she'd fixed on him as a husband, in preference to George Roberts? God, had Grey said anything to her? The thought disturbed him very much.

On the face of it, he thought no woman in her right mind would consider him in that light. He'd neither money, property, nor freedom, doubted he even *could* wed, without the permission of Lord John Grey. Betty could be in no ignorance of his circumstances; the entire estate knew exactly what—if not exactly who—he was.

Who. Aye, who. Examining his feelings—a mixture of surprise, alarm, and a mild revulsion—he was a bit bothered to find that part of it was pride, and pride of a particularly sinful kind. Betty was a common girl, the daughter of a poor tenant of Dunsany's—and he was both startled and discomfited to find that, in spite of present circumstance, he still thought of himself as the laird of Lallybroch.

"Well, that's foolish," he muttered, batting away a cloud of whining small flies that clustered round his head. He'd married Claire without a single thought of his place or hers. For all he'd known then, she was a—well, no. He smiled a little, involuntarily. He'd been an exile and an outlaw, with a price on his head. And he'd never have taken her for a slattern or peasant.

"I would have taken ye even if that was so, lass," he said softly. "I'd have had ye, no matter if I'd known the truth from the start."

He felt a little better, about himself, at least. That was the main root of his feeling regarding Betty, after all. Only that he could not countenance the thought of marrying again. That—

He stopped dead, catching sight of the corner of the wall where Quinn had sat, the Irishman's strange light eyes glowing with fervor. Betty was Quinn's sister-in-law; of course she knew who Jamie was. Had been.

The wind touched his neck with a sudden, different chill, and he turned at once, to see the fog coming down. He stood up in haste. Fogs on the fells were swift, sudden, and dangerous. He could see this one moving, a dirty great swell

like a wild beast poking its head above the rocks, tendrils of mist creeping over the ground like the tentacles of an octopus.

He was running down the slope and looking to the horses, who had all stopped feeding and were standing with their heads up, looking toward the fog and switching their tails uneasily. He'd have the hobbles off in seconds—best run to the Dunsanys and make them pack up at once; he'd get the horses while they were about their business.

Thinking this, he looked for the party and found them. Counted them automatically. Three heads and a—Three. Only three. He flung himself down the hill, leaping rocks and stumbling over tussocks.

"Where's William?" he gasped, as the three adults turned shocked faces on him. "The boy? Where is he?"



The boy was not quite three; he could not have gone far. He *couldn't*. So Jamie told himself, trying to control the panic that was creeping into his mind as fast as the fog was covering the ground.

"Stay here, and stay together!" he said to Isobel and Lady Dunsany, both of whom blinked at him in surprise. "Call out for the lad, keep calling out—but dinna move a step. Here, hold the horses." He thrust the bundled reins into Wilberforce's hand, and the lawyer opened his mouth as though to protest, but Jamie didn't stay to hear it.

"William!" he bellowed, plunging into the fog.

"Willie! Willie!" The women's higher voices obligingly took up the call, regular as a bell on a ship's buoy, and serving the same purpose. "Willie! Where are youuuu?"

The air had changed quite suddenly, no longer clear but soft and echoing; sound seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. "William!" The sound bounced off the stones and the short, leathery turf. "William!"

He was moving up the slope, Jamie could tell that much. Perhaps William had gone to explore the shepherd's hut. Wilberforce had joined the women now in calling out but was doing it in counterpoint, rather than in unison with them.

Jamie had the feeling that he could not breathe, that the fog was choking him—but this was nonsense. Pure illusion.

"William!"

His shins thumped into the fallen wall of the shepherd's hut. He could not see more than the faintest outline of the stones but felt his way inside and crawled quickly along the walls, calling out for the boy. Nothing.

Fogs might last an hour, or a day.

"Willie-iam-Wil-Willy-iam-WILLIE!"

Jamie gritted his teeth. If they didn't keep quiet now and then, he couldn't hear Willie shouting back. If the boy was capable of shouting. The footing was treacherous, the grass slippery, the ground rocky. And if he went all the way to the bottom of the slope, the moss ...

He went higher, among the tumbled stones. Staggered from one to another, feeling round their bases, stubbing his toes. The fog was cold in his chest, aching. His foot came down on something soft—Willie's jacket—and his heart leapt.

"WILLIAM!"

Was that a sound, a whimper? He stopped dead, trying to listen, trying to hear through the whisper of the moving fog and the distant voices, cacophonous as a ring of church bells.

And then, quite suddenly, he saw the boy curled up in a rocky hollow, the yellow of his shirt showing briefly through an eddy in the fog. He lunged and seized William before he could disappear, clutched him to his bosom, saying, "It's all right, *a chuisle*, it's all right now, dinna be troubled, we'll go

and see your grannie, aye?"

"Mac! Mac, Mac! Oh, Mac!"

Willie clung to him like a leech, trying to burrow into his chest, and he wrapped his arms tight around the boy, too overcome to speak.

To this point, he could not really have said that he loved William. Feel the terror of responsibility for him, yes. Carry thought of him like a gem in his pocket, certainly, reaching now and then to touch it, marveling. But now he felt the perfection of the tiny bones of William's spine through his clothes, smooth as marbles under his fingers, smelled the scent of him, rich with the incense of innocence and the faint tang of shit and clean linen. And thought his heart would break with love.



Gambit

Grey saw Jamie now and then, mostly in the distance as he went about his work. They had had no opportunity to speak, though—and he could not seem to invent a pretext, let alone think what he might say if he found one. He felt amazingly self-conscious, like a boy unable to say anything to an attractive girl. He'd be blushing, next thing, he thought, disgusted with himself.

Still, the fact remained that he really had nothing to say to Jamie anymore—or Jamie to him. *Well, not nothing,* he corrected himself. They'd always had a great deal to say to each other. But there was no excuse for conversation now.

Three days before his scheduled departure, he rose in the morning with the conviction that he must speak with Fraser, somehow. Not in the stiff manner of an interview between paroled prisoner and officer of the Crown—simply a few words, as man to man. If he could have that, he could go back to London with an easy heart, knowing that sometime, somewhere, there was the possibility that they might be friends again, even if that time and place could not be here and now.

It was no good anticipating an unknown battle. He ate his breakfast and told Tom to dress him for riding. Then he put on his hat and, heart beating a little faster than usual, went down toward the stables. He saw Jamie from a long way off; he couldn't be mistaken for any other man, even without the signal fire of his dark-red hair. He had it tailed today, not plaited, and the ends fluttered against the white of his shirt like tiny flames.

William was with him, trotting at his heels, chattering like a magpie. Grey smiled to see him; the little boy was in his tiny breeches and a loose shirt and looked a proper little horseman.

He hesitated for a moment, waiting to see what Fraser was about; better if he did not interrupt the day's work. But they were headed for the paddock, and he followed them at a distance.

A young man he didn't know was waiting there; he bobbed his head at Fraser, who offered a hand and said something to him. Perhaps this was the new groom; Dunsany had said something about needing a new man to replace Hanks, over tea last night.

The men spoke for a few minutes, Fraser gesturing toward the group of horses in the paddock. There were three horses there, frisky two-year-old stallions, who nipped and shoved one another, galloping up and down in play. Fraser took a coiled halter rope from the fence post, and a bag of oats, and handed these to the young man.

The new groom took them gingerly, then opened the gate and went into the paddock. Grey saw that his nervousness vanished as soon as he was in with the horses; that was a good sign. Fraser seemed to think so, too—he gave a small nod to himself and crossed his forearms on the top rail, settling himself to watch.

Willie yanked at the side of Fraser's breeches, obviously wanting to get up and see. Rather than pick the boy up, though, Fraser nodded, bent, and showed Willie how to put a foot up on the rail and then pull himself up. With a large hand cupped under his bottom to supply a boost, William made it to the upper rail and clung there, crowing with

pleasure. Fraser smiled at him and said something, then turned back to watch how the groom was getting on.

Perfect. Grey could go and watch, too: nothing more natural.

He came up beside Fraser, nodded briefly to him, and leaned in his turn on the fence. They watched in silence for a few moments; the new man had successfully whistled the stallions in, shaking his bagful of oats, and had slipped the halter rope around the neck of one of the young horses. The others, finding the oats gone, shook their manes and frisked away; the roped one tried to go with them and, displeased to find himself tied, jerked back.

Grey watched with interest to see what the groom would do; he didn't pull on the rope but rather swarmed inward along it and, with a hand on the stallion's mane, was on his back in an instant. He turned his face toward Fraser, flashing a grin, and Fraser laughed, turning up his thumb in approval.

"Well done!" he called. "Take him round a few times, aye?"

"Well done!" Willie piped, and hopped up and down on the fence rail like a sparrow.

Fraser put out a hand to touch the boy's shoulder, and he quieted at once. All three of them watched the groom take the horse barebacked round the paddock, sticking in spite of all attempts to shake or rear, until the stallion gave up and trotted peacefully along.

The sense of excitement ebbed to one of pleasant half attention. And, quite suddenly, Grey knew what to say.

"Queen's knight," he said quietly. "To queen two." It was, he knew, a dangerous opening.

Fraser didn't move, but Grey felt his sideways glance. After an instant's hesitation, he replied, "King's knight to bishop two," and Grey felt his heart lighten. It was the answer to the Torremolinos Gambit, the one he had used on that far-off, disastrous evening at Ardsmuir, when he had first laid his hand on Jamie Fraser's.

"Well done, well done," Willie was chanting softly to himself. "Well done, well done, well done!"



A Moonlicht Flicht

It was not yet teatime, but the sun hovered just above the leafless copper beeches; the dark came earlier every day. Jamie was walking back from the distant barn where the farm horses were kept. Three young men from the village tended these, feeding, brushing, and mucking out; Jamie came daily when the horses were brought in, to check for injury, lameness, cough, and general ill health, for the farm horses were, in their own way, nearly as valuable as the stud.

Joe Gore, one of the farmhands, was outside the barn, looking out for him, and looking anxious. The instant he saw Jamie, he broke into a clumsy run, waving his arms.

"Fanny's gone missing!" he blurted.

"How?" Jamie asked, startled. Fanny was a big Belgian draft horse, fawn in color, who stood seventeen hands at the shoulder. Not easily mislaid, even in the fading light.

"Well, I dunno, do I?" Joe was scared, and defensive with it. "Ike hit a stone and bent t' wheel rim, so'm he unhitched wagon and left her while he brung wheel to smithy. I go up to get her, and she's nay bloody there, is she?"

"Ye checked the walls and hedges, aye?" Jamie was already moving, heading for the distant cornfield, Joe at his heels. That field was not fenced but was bordered by drystone dikes on three sides, a windbreak hedgerow to the

north. The notion of Fanny jumping the walls was just this side of absurd, but she might conceivably have broken through the hedge; she was a powerful horse.

"Think I'm green? 'Course I did!"

"We'll go round by the road." Jamie jerked his chin toward the road that edged the property to the east; it was the border of Helwater's land and made along the high ground, offering a view of the whole of the back fields.

They had barely reached the road, though, when Joe gave a shout of relief, pointing. "There she is! Who the devil's that atop her?"

Jamie squinted for a moment into the glare of the fading sun and felt a lurch of alarm—for the small figure perched on Fanny's back, kicking its heels in frustration against the draft horse's great placid sides, was Betty Mitchell.

Fanny had been plodding stolidly along when first sighted, but now the big head reared up, nostrils flaring, and she broke into a thumping gallop. Betty screamed and fell off.

Jamie left Fanny to Joe, who seized the horse by the mane and was half-dragged toward the barn as Fanny made singlemindedly for her manger. Jamie squatted by Betty but was relieved to see her already struggling to rise, using the most unladylike language he'd heard since Claire had left him.

"What—" he began, seizing her under the arms, but she didn't wait for him to finish.

"Isobel!" she gasped. "That frigging lawyer's got her! You've got to go!"

"Go where?" He set her firmly on her feet, but she swayed alarmingly, and he gripped her arms to steady her. "Mr. Wilberforce, ye mean?"

"Who bloody else?" she snapped. "He came to take her driving, in a gig. She was already out in the yard with her bonnet on, getting in, when I saw her from the window. I ran down and said, whatever was she thinking? She wasn't going off with him by herself—Lady D would have my head!"

She paused to breathe heavily, gathering herself.

"She tried to make me stay, but he laughed and said I was quite right; 'twasn't proper for an unmarried young woman to be out with a man unchaperoned. She made a face, but she giggled at him and said, oh, all right, then, she supposed I could come."

Betty's hair was coming down in thick hanks round her face; she brushed one back with a "Tcha!" of irritation, then turned round and pointed up the road.

"We got up to the edge of Helwater, and he stops to look at the view. We all got out, and I'm standing there thinking it's perishing cold and me come out with no more than my shawl and cross with Isobel for being a thoughtless ninny, and all of a sudden Mr. Wilberforce grabs me by the shoulders and pushes me off the road and into a ditch, the fucking bastard! Look at that, just look!" She seized a handful of her muddied skirt and shook it under Jamie's nose, showing him a great rent in the fabric.

"Where's he gone, do ye know?"

"I can bloody guess! Gretna fucking Green, that's where!"

"Jesus Christ!" He took a deep breath, trying to think. "He'll never get there tonight—not in a gig."

She shrugged, exasperated. "Why are you standing here? You've got to go after them!"

"Me? Why, for God's sake?"

"Because you can ride fast! And because you're big enough to make her bloody come back with you! And you can keep it quiet!"

When he did not move at once, she stamped her foot. "Are you deaf? You have to go now! If he takes her maidenhead, she's stuffed more ways than one. The bugger's got a wife already."

"What? A wife?"

"Will you stop saying 'What' like a bloody parrot?" she snapped. "Yes! He married a girl in Perthshire, five or six

years back. She left him and went back to her parents, and he came to Derwentwater. I heard it from—well, never bloody mind! Just—just—go!"

"But you—"

"I'll manage! GO!" she bellowed, her face scarlet in the glare of the sinking sun.

He went.



His first impulse was to go back to the house, to the main stable. But that would take too long—and embroil him in awkward explanations that would not only delay his leaving but rouse the whole household.

"And you can keep it quiet," Betty had said.

"Aye, fat chance," he muttered, half-running for the barn. But if there was any chance of keeping this from becoming an open scandal, he had to admit that it probably lay with him, little as he liked it.

There was no possibility of pursuing Wilberforce on one of the farm horses, even were they not knackered from the day's work. But there were two fine mules, Whitey and Mike, who were kept to draw the hay wagon. They were broken to the saddle, at least, and had spent the day in pasture. He might just ...

By the time he'd reached this point in his thoughts, he was already rifling through the tack in search of a snaffle and, ten minutes later, was mounted on a surprised and affronted Whitey, trotting toward the road, the three stable-hands staring after them with their mouths hanging open. He saw Betty in the distance, limping toward the house, her entire figure emanating indignation.

He felt no small amount of this emotion himself. His impulse was to think that Isobel had made her bed and could lie in it—but, after all, she was very young and knew nothing

of men, let alone a scoundrel like Wilberforce.

And she would indeed be stuffed, as Betty inelegantly put it, once Wilberforce had taken her maidenhead. Quite simply, her life would be ruined. And her family would be badly damaged—more damaged. They'd lost two of their three children already.

He pressed his lips tight. He supposed he owed it to Geneva Dunsany and her parents to save her little sister.

He wished he had thought to tell Betty to seek out Lord John and let him know what was to do—but it was too late for that, and he couldn't have waited for Grey to come, in any case. The sun had sunk below the trees now, though the sky remained light; he'd have an hour, maybe, before full dark. He might reach the coaching road in that time.

If Wilberforce meant to reach Gretna Green, just over the Scottish border, where he could marry Isobel without the consent of her parents—and without anything in the way of questions asked—he must be taking the coaching road that led from London to Edinburgh. This passed within a few miles of Helwater. And it had inns along the way.

Not even an eloping scoundrel would try to drive a gig all the way to Gretna at night. They'd have to stop overnight and go on in the morning.

He might catch them in time.



It was a good deal safer to ride a mule in the dark than to drive a gig, but still nothing a sane man would want to do. He was shivering—and not entirely from the cold, though he was wearing only a leather jerkin over his shirt—and cursing in a manner that would have outdone Betty, by the time he saw the lights of the first posthouse.

He gave the mule to an ostler to water, asking as he did whether a gig had stopped, with a well-dressed man and a young woman in it?

It had not, though the ostler had seen such a conveyance go by, just before dark, and thought the driver an idiot.

"Aye," Jamie said briefly. "How far's the next inn?"

"Two miles," the man replied, peering at him curiously. "You're after him, are you? What's he done?"

"Nothing," Jamie assured him. "He's a solicitor, hurryin' to a dying client who needs a will changed. He's left behind some papers he needs, so they sent me on to bring them."

"Oh." The ostler—like everyone else in the world—had no interest in legal matters.

Jamie had no money, so shared the mule's water, scooping it up with his hand. The ostler took his lack of money personally, but Jamie loomed menacingly at him, and the ostler took his disgruntlement off to a safe distance, muttering insults.

Back to the road, after a brief contest of wills between Jamie and the mule, and on into the night. There was a halfmoon, barely up, and as it rose, he was at least able to see the edge of the road and thus not fear going badly astray in the dark.

Biddle was not a posthouse but rather a small hamlet boasting one tavern—outside which stood the Helwater gig, its traces unhitched. Jamie said a quick Hail Mary in thanks, added an Our Father for strength, and swung grimly off the mule.

He tied Whitey to the rail and stood for a moment, rubbing his stubbled chin and thinking how to proceed. One way if they were in separate rooms—but another if they were together. And if solicitor Wilberforce was the man that Betty thought him, Jamie would put money on together. The man wouldn't want to risk being caught before he'd put the matter beyond question; he wouldn't wait for marriage before deflowering the girl, for once he'd taken her virginity, there was no going back.

The simplest thing would be to walk in and demand to know the whereabouts of Wilberforce and Isobel—but if the aim was as much to prevent scandal as it was to rescue the fat-heided wee lassie from her peril, he'd best not do that. Instead, he walked quietly round behind the tavern, looking at the windows.

It was a small place: only two rooms upstairs, and only one of those windows was lit. The shutters were drawn, but he saw a shadow pass by the crack, and as he stood there in the sharp-smelling dark, he heard Isobel's giggle, high and nervous, and then the rumble of Wilberforce's voice.

Not too late, then. He drew a deep breath and flexed his hands, stiff with cold and long riding.

The words of an old Highland song echoed in his mind as he rummaged about the ramshackle shed behind the tavern. He had no notion of the music, but it was a ballad, and he recalled the story, which had to do with an abducted bride.

... in one bed they were laid, were laid, in one bed they were laid.

In the song, the young woman hadn't wanted to be abducted, though, and fiercely resisted the attempts of her would-be bridegroom to consummate the marriage.

"Before I lose my maidenheid, I'll fight wi' you 'til dawn, 'til dawn, I'll fight wi' you 'til dawn," he murmured absently, feeling round the walls. A good-size beer barrel would be enough; tall as he was, he could reach the sill, he thought.

The valiant maid succeeded—owing as much, Jamie thought, to the unmanly feebleness of her would-be husband as to her own efforts—and, come dawn, emerged triumphant from the boudoir, insisting that her abductors restore her to her home,... *virgin as I came, I came—virgin as I came!*

Well, he hadn't heard any screeching yet, so there was a chance Isobel would come home in the same condition. He didn't find a suitable barrel but did come across something better—a thatcher's ladder, laid on its side. He carried this

out, walking as softly as he could, and laid it carefully against the wall.

There were noises from inside the tavern—the usual clatter and voices, and a smell of roasted meat that made his mouth water, despite his preoccupation. He swallowed saliva and set foot on the ladder.

Isobel screamed.

The sound was cut off abruptly, as by a hand placed over her mouth, and three seconds later Jamie smashed in the shutter with a ferocious kick and dived headfirst into the room.

Lawyer Wilberforce yelped in shock. So did Isobel. The man had her pressed to the bed, and was on top of her in only his shirt, his hairy arse protruding obscenely between her white round thighs, glimmering in the candlelight.

Jamie reached the bed in two steps, grabbed Wilberforce by the shoulders, pulled him off Isobel, punched him in the face, and sent him staggering into the wall. He picked up the candlestick and bent to take one hasty glance between Isobel's legs, but saw neither blood nor any other sign of recent intrusion, so put down the candlestick, yanked her night rail down over her legs, lifted her off the bed, and headed for the window, then on second thought went back for a blanket.

Someone was calling up the stairs, wanting to know was anything wrong?

Jamie bared his teeth at Wilberforce and ripped the side of his hand across his own throat, ordering silence. The lawyer was on the floor, back pressed against the door, but at this made an earnest attempt to scrabble backward through it.

"I can't, I can't," Isobel was saying, breathless. He didn't know if she meant she couldn't climb down the ladder in the dark or was only hysterical, but he hadn't time to ask her. He hoisted her over his shoulder, threw the blanket on top of her, stood on the sill, and stepped backward out into the night.

The ladder, while stout enough for its purpose, hadn't been intended for elopements. The rung snapped under his foot and he slid most of the way to the ground, clinging to the rails in terror as the ladder slewed sideways. He hit the ground—still standing—and lost both his grip and Isobel. The ladder fell sideways with a clattering thud, Isobel with a thump and a stifled shriek.

He picked up the lass and ran for the mule, Isobel whimpering and digging her fingernails into his neck. He slapped her briefly on the bum to make her stop, put her up on the mule, untied it, and made for the road as the door of the inn opened and a truculent male voice said—from the safety of the lighted interior—"I see you, you bugger! I see you!"

Isobel said not a word on the way back to Helwater.



John Grey was lying in his bed, contentedly reading Mrs. Hagwood's *Love in Excess; or, The Fatal Enquiry*, when he heard a great rustling and bumping in the corridor outside. Tom had gone to bed long since in the servants' attic, so Grey flung back the covers, reaching for his banyan. He had barely got this on when there was a brief, imperative thump at his door that shivered its boards, as though someone had kicked it.

Someone had.

He wrenched the door open and Jamie Fraser walked in, dripping wet carrying someone wrapped in a blanket. Breathing heavily, he crossed the room and deposited his burden on Grey's rumpled bed with a grunt. The burden let out a small squeak and clutched the blanket round itself.

"Isobel?" Grey glanced wildly at Fraser. "What's happened? Is she hurt?"

"You need to soothe her and put her back where she belongs," Fraser said, in very decent German. This startled Grey nearly as much as the intrusion, though an instant's thought supplied the explanation—Isobel spoke French but not German.

"Jawohl," he replied, giving Fraser a sideways look. He hadn't known Fraser spoke German, and a brief thought of Stephan von Namtzen flashed through his mind. Christ, what might they have said to each other in Fraser's hearing? That didn't matter now, though.

"What's happened, my dear?"

Isobel was hunched on the edge of the bed, snuffling and hiccuping. Her face was bloated and red, her blond hair loose, damp and tangled about her shoulders. Grey sat down gingerly beside her and rubbed her back gently.

"I'b ad idiot," Isobel said thickly, and buried her face in her hands.

"She tried to elope with the lawyer—Wilberforce," Jamie said in English. "Her maid came and got me and I went after them." Jamie returned to German and acquainted Grey with the situation in a few blunt sentences, including his intelligence regarding Wilberforce's wife and the precise situation in which he had found the lawyer and Isobel.

"The *schwanzlutscher* hadn't penetrated her, but it was close enough to give her a shock," he said, looking down dispassionately on Isobel, who was slumping with exhaustion, her head leaning on Grey's shoulder as he put his arm about her.

"Bastard," Grey said. It was the same word in English and German, and Isobel shuddered convulsively. "You're safe, sweetheart," he murmured to her. "Don't worry. Everything will be all right." The wet blanket had slipped off her shoulders and puddled round her, and he saw with a pang that she was wearing a nightdress of sheer lawn, with broderie Anglaise inserts and pale pink ribbon at the neck.

She'd gone prepared for her wedding night—only she hadn't been prepared at all, poor little creature.

"What did you do to the lawyer?" he asked Jamie in German. "You didn't kill him, did you?" It was pouring outside; he hoped he wouldn't have to go and hide Wilberforce's body.

"Nein." Fraser didn't elaborate, but squatted in front of Isobel.

"No one knows," he said to her softly, eyes intent on her face. "No one needs to know. Ever."

She didn't want to look at him; Grey could feel her resistance. But after a moment she lifted her head and nodded, her mouth compressed to stop it trembling.

"I—thank you," she blurted. Tears ran down her cheeks, but she wasn't sobbing or shivering anymore, and her body had begun to relax.

"It's all right, lass," Fraser said to her, still softly. He rose then and went to the door, hesitating there. Grey patted Isobel's hand and, leaving her, came across to see Fraser out.

"If you can get her back to her room without being seen, Betty will take care of her," Jamie said to Grey in a low voice. And then in German, "When she's calm, tell her to forget it. She won't, but I don't want her to feel that she is in my debt. It would be awkward for us both."

"She is, nonetheless. And she is an honorable woman. She'll want to repay you in some way. Let me think how best to handle it."

"I am obliged." Fraser spoke abstractedly, though, and his eyes were still on Isobel. "There is ... if she ..." His gaze switched suddenly to Grey's face.

Jamie's own face was rough with red stubble and lined with tiredness, his eyes dark and bloodshot. Grey could see that the knuckles of his left hand were swollen and the skin was broken; he'd likely punched Wilberforce in the mouth.

"There is a thing I want," Fraser said, very low-voiced, still

in German. "But it cannot be blackmail or look like it in any way. If there were some means to suggest it very tactfully ..."

"I see your opinion of my diplomacy has improved. What is it that you want?"

A brief smile touched Fraser's face, though it vanished almost at once.

"The wee lad," he said. "They make him wear a corset. I would like to see him free of it."

Grey was extremely surprised, but merely nodded.

"All right. I'll see about it."

"Not tonight," Fraser said hastily. Isobel had collapsed with a little sigh, her head on Grey's pillow, feet trailing on the floor.

"No," he agreed. "Not tonight."

He closed the door quietly behind Fraser and went to deal with the girl in his bed.



Point of Departure

Tom had the luggage loaded onto the mule, and the horses were waiting. Lord John embraced Lady Dunsany and—very gently—Isobel and shook hands with Lord Dunsany in farewell. The old man's hands were cold, and the bones as fragile in his grasp as dried twigs. He felt a pang, wondering if he would see Dunsany alive the next time he came—and a deeper pang of concern, realizing what the old man's death might mean to him, beyond the loss of a dear old friend.

Well ... he'd cross that bridge when he came to it, and God send he wasn't coming to it just yet.

Outside, the weather was lowering, the first drops of rain already making wet spots on the flags. The horses' ears twitched and turned to and fro; they didn't mind rain and were fresh and eager to be off.

Jamie was holding Grey's gelding. He inclined his head respectfully and stood back to allow Grey to mount by himself. As Grey put his hand on the pommel, he heard a low Scots voice murmur in his ear:

"Queen's rook to king eight. Check."

Grey laughed out loud, a burst of exhilaration pushing aside his disquiet.

"Ha," he said, though without raising his voice. "Queen's bishop to knight four. Check. And mate, Mr ... MacKenzie."



Jamie couldn't enlist Keren's help this time. Instead, when Peggy the nursemaid came to fetch Willie back to the nursery for his tea, he asked her to take a note from him to Betty. Peggy couldn't read, and while she might tell someone he was meeting Betty, she couldn't know where. He particularly didn't wish to be overheard.

Betty was waiting for him behind the hay shed, fastidiously eyeing the immense manure pile with a curled lip. She switched the expression to him, raising one brow in inquiry.

"I've a wee thing for ye, Mrs. Betty," he said without preliminary.

"About time," she said, the curl melting into a coquettish smile. "Though not so wee as all *that*, I hope. And I also hope you have a better place than this for it, too," she added, with a glance at the manure. It was too late in the season for flies, and Jamie personally found the smell rather pleasant, but he could see she didn't share this opinion.

"The place will do well enough," he said. "Give me your hand, lass."

She did, looking expectant. The look changed to one of astonishment when he put the little purse into her palm.

"What's this?" she asked, but the chink of coins as she weighed the purse was answer enough.

"That's your dowry, lass," he said, smiling.

She looked at him suspiciously, plainly not knowing whether this was a joke or something else.

"A lass like you should be marrit," he said. "But it's not me ye should be marrying."

"Who says so?" she asked, fixing him with a fishy eye.

"I do," he replied equably. "Like the wicked Mr. Wilberforce, lass—I've got a wife."

She blinked.

"You do? Where?"

Ah, where indeed?

"She couldna come with me, when I was captured after Culloden. But she's alive still."

Lord, that she may be safe ...

"But there's a man that wants ye bad, lass, and well ye know it. George Roberts is a fine man, and with that wee bawbee"—he nodded at the purse in her hand—"the two of ye could set up in a bit wee cottage, maybe."

She didn't say anything but pursed her lips, and he could see her envisioning the prospect.

"Ye should have your own hearth, lass—and a cradle by it, wi' your own bairn in it."

She swallowed and, for the first time since he'd known her, looked tremulous and uncertain.

"I—but—why?" She made a tentative gesture toward him with the purse, not quite offering it back to him. "Surely you need this?"

He shook his head and took a definite step back, waving her off.

"Believe me, lass. There's nothing I'd rather do with it. Take it wi' my blessing—and if ye like, ye can call your firstborn Jamie." He smiled at her, feeling the warmth in his chest rise into the back of his eyes.

She made an incoherent sound and took a pace toward him, rose onto her toes, and kissed him on the mouth.

A strangled gasp broke them apart, and Jamie turned to see Crusoe goggling at them from the corner of the shed.

"What the devil are you looking at?" Betty snapped at him.

"Not a thing, miss," Crusoe assured her, and put one large palm over his mouth.



Succession

October 26, 1760

Grey arrived in London to the tolling of passing bells.

"The king is dead!" cried the ballad sellers, the news chanters, the scribblers, the street urchins, their voices echoing through the city. "Long live the king!"

In the furious preparations and public preoccupations that attend a state funeral, the final arrests of the Irish Jacobite plotters who had called themselves the Wild Hunt took place without notice. Harold, Duke of Pardloe, neither ate nor slept for several days during this effort, nor did his brother, and it was in a state of mind somewhere between sleep and death that they came to Westminster Abbey on the night of the king's obsequies.

The Duke of Cumberland did not look well either. Grey saw Hal's eyes rest on Cumberland with an odd expression, somewhere between grim satisfaction and grudging sympathy. Cumberland had suffered a stroke not long before, and one side of his face still sagged, the eye on that side almost closed. The other was still pugnacious, though, and looked daggers at Hal from the other side of Henry VII's chapel. Then the duke's attention was distracted by his own brother, the Duke of Newcastle, who was crying, alternately mopping his eyes and using his glass to spy out the crowd

and see who was there. A look of disgust crossed Cumberland's face, and he looked back down into the vault, where the huge purple-draped coffin sat somber and majestic in the light of six enormous silver candelabra, all ablaze.

"Cumberland's thinking he will descend there himself in no short time, I fear." Horace Walpole's soft whisper came from behind Grey, but he couldn't tell whether it was directed to him or merely Walpole making observations to himself. Horry talked all the time, and it seemed to make little difference whether anyone was listening.

Whatever you wanted to say about the royal family—and there was quite a lot you could say—they mostly displayed a becoming fortitude in their time of sorrow. The funeral of George II had been going on for more than two hours now, and Grey's own feet were mere blocks of ice from standing on the cold marble of the abbey floor, though Tom had made him put on two pair of stockings and his woolen drawers. His shins ached.

Newcastle had surreptitiously stepped onto the five-foot train of Cumberland's black cloak in order to avoid the mortal chill of the marble floor; Grey hoped he would neglect to get off before his brother started walking again. But Cumberland stood like a rock, despite a bad leg. He'd chosen—God knew why—to wear a dark-brown wig in the style called "Adonis," which went oddly with his distorted, bloated face. Maybe Horry was right.

The view down into the vault was impressive; he'd admit that much. George II was now once and forever safe from the Wild Hunt—and every other earthly threat. Three officers of the Irish Brigades—so far—had been court-martialed quietly and condemned to hang for treason. The executions would be private, too. The monarchy was safe; the public would never know.

You did it, Charlie, Grey thought. Goodbye. And sudden tears made the candle flames blur bright and huge. No one

noticed; there were a number of people moved to tears by the emotion of the occasion. Charles Carruthers had died alone in an attic in Canada and had no resting place. Grey had had Charlie's body burned, his ashes scattered, that carefully assembled packet of papers his only memorial.

"Such a relief, my dear," Walpole—who was exceedingly slight—was saying to Grenville. "I was positive they would pair me with a ten-year-old boy, and the young have so little conversation."

The huge fretted vault of the abbey rustled and chirped as though it were full of roosting bats, the noise a counterpoint to the constant tolling of bells overhead and the firing of minute guns outside. One went off, quite close, and Grey saw Hal close his eyes in sudden pain; his brother had one of his sick headaches and was having trouble staying on his feet. If there had been incense, it would likely have finished him off; he'd thought Hal was about to vomit when Newcastle scampered past him earlier, reeking loudly of bergamot and vetiver.

For all the lack of frankincense and priests saying Masses for the late king's soul, the ceremony was lavish enough to have pleased a cardinal. The bishop had blundered badly through the prayers, but no one noticed. Now the interminable anthem droned on and on, unmeasurably tedious. Grey found himself wondering whether it sounded any better to him than it would have to Jamie Fraser, with his inability to hear music. Mere rhythmic noise, in either case. It wasn't doing Hal any good; he gave a stifled moan.

He pulled his thoughts hurriedly away from Fraser, moving a little closer to Hal in case he fell over. His undisciplined thoughts promptly veered to Percy Wainwright. He'd stood thus in church with Percy—his new stepbrother—at the marriage of Grey's mother to Percy's stepfather. Close enough that their hands had found each other, hidden in the full skirts of their coats.

He didn't want to think about Percy. Obligingly, his thoughts veered straight back in the direction of Jamie Fraser.

Will you bloody go away? he thought irritably, and jerked his attention firmly to the sight before him: people were crammed into every crevice of the chapel, sitting on anything they could find. The white breath of the crowd mingled with the smell of smoke from the torches in the nave. If Hal did pass out, Grey thought, he wouldn't fall down; there wasn't room. Nonetheless, he moved closer, his elbow brushing Hal's.

"At least now we'll have a ruler who speaks English. More or less." Walpole's cynical remark drew Grey's wandering eye to the heir—the king, he should say. The new George looked just like all the Hanovers, he thought, the beaky nose and heavy-lidded, gelid eyes undiluted by any softer maternal influence; doubtless they'd all looked that way for a thousand years and would do so for another thousand. George III was only twenty-two, though, and Grey wondered how well he might withstand the influence of his uncle Cumberland, should the latter decide to shift his concerns from horse racing to politics.

Though perhaps his health would not recover enough to allow any meddling. He looked almost as ill as Hal did. Grey didn't suppose that the outcome of Siverly's court-martial had actually caused Cumberland to have a paralytic stroke, but the timing was coincidental.

The anthem plodded toward a conclusion, and people began to draw breath in relief—but it was a false amnesty; the ponderous refrain started up again, this time sung by a bevy of angel-faced little boys, and the audience relapsed into glazed endurance. Perhaps the point of funerals was to exhaust the mourners, thus numbing the more exigent emotions.

In spite of the tedium, Grey found something reassuring

about the service, with its sheer solidity, its insistence upon permanence in the face of transience, the reliability of succession. Life was fragile, but life went on. King to king, father to son ...

Father to son. And with that thought, all the disconnected, fragmentary, scattered fancies in his brain dropped suddenly into a single, vivid image: Jamie Fraser, seen from the back, looking over the horses in the paddock at Helwater. And beside him, standing on a rail and clinging to a higher one, William, Earl of Ellesmere. The alert cock of their heads, the set of their shoulders, the wide stance—just the same. If one had eyes to see, it was plain as the nose on the new king's face.

And now a great sense of peace filled his soul, as the anthem at last came to an end and a huge sigh filled the abbey. He remembered Jamie's face as they rode in to Helwater, alight as they saw the women on the lawn—with William.

He'd suspected it when he'd found Fraser in the chapel with Geneva Dunsany's coffin, just before her funeral. But now he knew, beyond doubt. Knew, too, why Fraser did not desire his freedom.

A sudden poke in the back jerked him from his revelation.

"I do believe Pardloe's going to die," Walpole said. A small, neat hand came through the narrow gap between the Grey brothers, holding a corked glass vial. "Would you care to use my salts?"

Startled, Grey looked at his brother. Hal's face was white as a sheet and running with sweat, his eyes huge and dilated, absolutely black with pain. He was swaying. Grey grabbed the salts with one hand, Hal's arm with the other.

By the combined effect of smelling salts and force of will, Hal remained on his feet, and the service came mercifully to an end ten minutes later.

George Grenville had come in a sedan chair, and his

bearers were waiting on the embankment. Grenville generously put these at Hal's service, and he was taken off at the trot for Argus House, nearly insensible. Grey took leave of his friends as soon as he decently could and made his own way home on foot.

The dark streets near the abbey were thronged with the people of London, come out to pay their respects; they would file through all night, and much of the next day, before the vault was sealed again. Within a few minutes, though, Grey had made his way through the press and found himself more or less alone under the night sky, cloudy and cold with autumn's chill, nearly the same purple as the velvet shroud on the old king's coffin.

He felt both elated and peaceful, almost valedictory: a strange state of mind to experience in the wake of a funeral.

Part of it was Charlie, of course, and the knowledge that he had not failed his dead friend. Beyond that, though, was the knowledge that it lay within his power to do something equally important for the living one. He could keep James Fraser prisoner.

Rain began to fall, but it was a light drizzle, no more, and he did not hurry his step on that account. When he reached Argus House, he was fresh and damp, the smoke and stink of the crowd blown away, and in possession of a fine appetite. When he came in, though, his thoughts of supper were delayed by discovery of an equerry, waiting patiently in the foyer.

Stephan, he thought, seeing the distinctive mauve and green of the outlandish livery of the house of von Erdberg, and his heart jumped. Had something happened to the graf?

"My lord," said the servant, bowing. He bent and picked up a large, round, lidded basket that had been sitting on the floor and presented it as though it contained something of immense value, though the basket itself was rough and common. "His excellency the graf hopes you will accept this token of his friendship."

Deeply puzzled, Grey lifted the lid of the basket and, in the light of the candles, found a pair of bright dark eyes staring up at him from the face of a tiny, long-nosed black puppy, curled up on a white linen towel. The little hound had floppy ears and absurdly stumpy, powerful legs, with huge paws and a long, graceful tail whose tip beat in tentative greeting.

Grey laughed, utterly charmed, and gently picked the puppy up. It was a badger hound, specially bred by Stephan; he called them *Dackels*, an affectionate diminutive for *dachshund*—"badger hound." It put out a tiny pink tongue and very delicately licked his knuckles.

"Hallo, there," he said to the puppy. "Hungry? I am. Let's go and find some milk for you, shall we?" He dug in his pocket and offered a coin to the servant but found the man now holding a sealed note, which he put into Grey's hand with another obsequious bow.

Not wanting to set down the dog, he managed to break the seal with his thumb and open the note. In the light of the nearest sconce, he read Stephan's words, set down in German in a firm black hand.

Bring him when you come to visit me. We will perhaps hunt together again.

—S.

Helwater December 21

It was cold in the loft, and his sleep-mazed mind groped among the icy drafts after the words still ringing in his mind. *Bonnie lad*.

Wind struck the barn and went booming round the roof. A strong chilly draft with a scent of snow stirred the somnolence, and two or three of the horses shifted below, grunting and whickering. *Helwater*. The knowledge of the place settled on him, and the fragments of Scotland and Lallybroch cracked and flaked away, fragile as a skin of dried mud.

Helwater. Straw rustling under him, the ends poking through the rough ticking, prickling through his shirt. Dark air, alive around him.

Bonnie lad ...

They'd brought down the Yule log to the house that afternoon, all the household taking part, the women bundled to the eyebrows, the men ruddy, flushed with the labor, staggering, singing, dragging the monstrous log with ropes, its rough skin packed with snow, a great furrow left where it passed, the snow plowed high on either side.

Willie rode atop the log, screeching with excitement, clinging to the rope. Once back at the house, Isobel had tried to teach him to sing "Good King Wenceslas," but it was beyond him, and he dashed to and fro, into everything, until his grandmother declared that he would drive her to distraction and told Peggy to take him to the stable to help Jamie and Crusoe bring in the fresh-cut branches of pine and fir.

Thrilled, Willie rode on Jamie's saddlebow to the grove and stood obediently on a stump where Jamie had put him, safe out of the way of the axes while the boughs were cut down. Then he helped to load the greenery, clutching two or three fragrant, mangled twigs to his chest, dutifully chucking these in the general direction of the huge basket, then running back again for more, heedless of where his burden actually landed.

Jamie turned over, wriggling deeper into the nest of blankets, drowsy, remembering. He'd kept it up, the wean had, back and forth, back and forth, though red in the face and panting, until he dropped the very last branch on the pile. Jamie had looked down to find Willie beaming up at him with pride, laughed, and said on impulse, "Aye, that's a bonnie lad. Come on. Let's go home."

William had fallen asleep on the ride home, his head heavy as a cannonball in its woolen cap against Jamie's chest. Jamie had dismounted carefully, holding the child in one arm, but Willie had wakened, blinked groggily at Jamie, and said, "WEN-sess-loss," clear as a bell, then fallen promptly back asleep. He'd waked properly by the time he was handed over to Nanny Elspeth, though, and as Jamie walked away, he had heard Willie, as he walked away, telling Nanny, "I a bonnie lad!"

But those words came out of his dreams from somewhere else, and long ago. Had his own father said that to him once?

He thought so, and for an instant—just an instant—was with his father and his brother, Willie, excited beyond bearing, holding the first fish he'd ever caught by himself, slimy and flapping, both of them laughing at him, with him in joy. "Bonnie lad!"

Willie. God, Willie. I'm so glad they gave him your name. He seldom thought of his brother, but every now and then, he could feel Willie with him; sometimes his mother or his father. More often, Claire.

I wish ye could see him, Sassenach, he thought. He's a bonnie lad. Loud and obnoxious, he added with honesty, but bonnie.

What would his own parents think of William? They had neither of them lived to see any of their children's children.

He lay for some time, his throat aching, listening to the dark, hearing the voices of his dead pass by in the wind. His thoughts grew vague and his grief eased, comforted by the knowledge of love, still alive in the world. Sleep came near again.

He touched the rough crucifix that lay against his chest and whispered to the moving air, "Lord, that she might be safe, she and my children." Then turned his cheek to her reaching hand and touched her through the veils of time.

Author's Notes



The Wild Hunt

The concept of the Wild Hunt—a spectral horde seen rushing through the night skies or above the ground, hunting for things unknown—doesn't come from Celtic mythology but from that of Central/Northern/Western Europe. Celtic mythology being the very plastic and inclusive thing that it is (vide the way it historically entwined itself easily with Catholic theology in Scotland and Ireland, where people might say a prayer to St. Bride in one breath, and a charm against piskies in the next)—and the inability of any Celt to pass up a good story—and it's no wonder that you find variations on the Wild Hunt in the Celtic lands as well.

In some forms of these stories, the horde consists of faeries, in others, the "hunt" consists of the souls of the dead. Either way, it isn't something you want to meet on a dark night—or a moonlit one, either. In the British forms, the best-known "wild hunt" tales are "Tam Lin" and "Thomas the Rhymer" (there are dozens of variations), in which a young man meets the Queen of Faerie and is more or less abducted by her.

The notion of abduction of humans by the hunt is common to almost all hunt tales, though—and it may be this aspect that caused our Irish Jacobite plotters to adopt this *nom de guerre*, as they planned to abduct George II. Then again, it might have been a reference to and natural extension from the older name, "Wild Geese," as the Irish Jacobites of the

late seventeenth century called themselves. The idea of the *teind*—the tithe to hell—is from "Tam Lin," and likely a word that would have resonance to people who lived by a code of honor, to whom betrayal and treason would carry a heavy price.

The host is riding from Knocknarea And over the grave of Clooth-na-Bare; Caoilte tossing his burning hair, And Niamh calling Away, come away: Empty your heart of its mortal dream. The winds awaken, the leaves whirl round, Our cheeks are pale, our hair is unbound, Our breasts are heaving our eyes are agleam, Our arms are waving our lips are apart; And if any gaze on our rushing band, We come between him and the deed of his hand, We come between him and the hope of his heart. The host is rushing 'twixt night and day, And where is there hope or deed as fair? Caoilte tossing his burning hair, And Niamh calling Away, come away. —William Butler Yeats, "The Hosting of the Sidhe"

[Footnote: An interesting modern variation on the Wild Hunt is the BBC television series *Quatermass and the Pit*, by Nigel Kneale, broadcast in December/January of 1958/59. In this science fiction serial, the concept of the Wild Hunt is used as a very literal metaphor for the murderous and bestial impulses of humanity (truly creepy in spots, hilarious in others; great acting!).]

Thomas Lally

Thomas Arthur, Comte de Lally, Baron Tollendal, is one of the real historical figures who appear in this book, along with George II, George III, and Horace Walpole. Born of an Irish father and a French mother (from whom he inherited his titles), he served with the famous Irish Brigade at Fontenoy and was a French general during the Seven Years War. He did in fact serve as Charles Edward Stuart's aide de camp during the battle of Falkirk, in the '45, and was mixed up in various Jacobite plots, including one hatched in Ireland in the 1760's.

I have taken one small liberty with Thomas Lally, though. He was captured by the British following the Siege of Pondicherry, in India, and taken to England in 1761, not 1760. Given his real involvement with the Irish Jacobites—and his obvious spiritual kinship with Jamie Fraser as a prisoner of the English—I thought the minor temporal dislocation was worth it.

An interesting—if grim—footnote to Lally's life is that he was indeed Just Furious about slurs cast on his reputation in France, following the French defeat at Pondicherry, and agitated to be sent back to France to defend himself at a court-martial. After five years of steady badgering, the British *did* send him back to France—where, in 1766, he was promptly convicted of treason and beheaded.

Twenty years later, a French court reviewed the evidence and reversed his conviction, which I trust he found satisfying.

Bog Bodies

I've always found bog bodies—the corpses of people found preserved in peat bogs—fascinating. The garb and accoutrements of the body found on Inchcleraun (which is a real place, and has a real monastery) are a composite of such items found on or with bog bodies from Europe. My thanks

to the Los Angeles Museum of Natural History for hosting a special exhibition on bog bodies that provided me with a great deal of useful information, and to the British Museum, whose Lindow Man has always spoken powerfully to me.

George II, George III, and Horace Walpole

I love Horace Walpole, as does anyone with an interest in eighteenth-century English society. The fourth son of Robert Walpole, who was England's first prime minister (though he himself never used the title), Horace was not politically active, nor was he socially important, physically attractive, or otherwise very noticeable. He was, however, intelligent, observant, witty, sarcastic, and apparently never suffered from writer's cramp. His letters provide one of the most detailed and intimate views of English society during the mid-eighteenth century, and I'm indebted to one of these missives for Lord John's experience of King George II's state funeral.

Below is the text of Walpole's account of the funeral; you may find it interesting to compare this with the fictionalized view in Chapter 43. The temptation, when presented with such eloquent historical largesse, is to use it all, but that's a temptation that should, by and large, be resisted. The point of fiction is to tell a particular story, and too much embroidery can't but detract, no matter how fascinating.

In this instance, the point of showing you the king's funeral was primarily that it provided Lord John with his moment of enlightenment regarding Jamie's motive for remaining at Helwater. Secondarily, it shows a historical turning point that a) anchors the reader in time, b) metaphorically underlines the conclusion of the Grey brothers' quest, c) marks a turning point in Lord John's relationship with Jamie Fraser, and d) opens the door to a new phase of both personal and public history—for George

III (who was the grandson, not the son, of George II) is, of course, the king from whom the American colonies revolted, and we see in the later books of the Outlander series just how *that* affects the lives of Lord John, Jamie Fraser, and William.

To George Montagu, Esq. Arlington-street, November 13, 1760.

... Do you know, I had the curiosity to go to the burying t'other night; I had never seen a royal funeral; nay, I walked as a rag of quality, which I found would be, and so it was, the easiest way of seeing it. It is absolutely a noble sight. The prince's chamber, hung with purple, and a quantity of silver lamps, the coffin under a canopy of purple velvet, and six vast chandeliers of silver on high stands, had a very good effect. The ambassador from Tripoli and his son were carried to see that chamber. The procession, through a line of foot-guards, every seventh man bearing a torch, the horseguards lining the outside, their officers with drawn sabres and crape sashes on horseback, the drums muffled, the fifes, bells tolling, and minute guns,—all this was very solemn. But the charm was the entrance of the abbey, where we were received by the dean and chapter in rich robes, the choir and almsmen bearing torches; the whole abbey so illuminated, that one saw it to greater advantage than by day; the tombs, long aisles, and fretted roof, all appearing distinctly, and with the happiest chiara scuro. There wanted nothing but incense, and little chapels here and there, with priests saying mass for the repose of the defunct; yet one could not complain of its not being catholic enough. I had been in dread of being coupled with some boy of ten years old; but the heralds were not very accurate, and I walked with George Grenville, taller and older, to keep me in countenance. When we came to the chapel of Henry the seventh, all solemnity and decorum ceased; no order was observed, people sat or stood where they could or would; the yeomen of the guard were crying out for help, oppressed by the immense weight of the coffin; the bishop read sadly, and blundered in the prayers; the fine chapter, Man that is born of a woman, was chaunted, not read; and the anthem, besides being immeasurably tedious, would have served as well for a nuptial. The real serious part was the figure of

the duke of Cumberland, heightened by a thousand melancholy circumstances. He had a dark brown adonis, and a cloak of black cloth, with a train of five yards. Attending the funeral of a father could not be pleasant: his leg extremely bad, yet forced to stand upon it near two hours; his face bloated and distorted with his late paralytic stroke, which has affected too one of his eyes, and placed over the mouth of the vault, into which, in all probability, he must himself so soon descend; think how unpleasant a situation! He bore it all with a firm and unaffected countenance. This grave scene was fully contrasted by the burlesque duke of Newcastle. He fell into a fit of crying the moment he came into the chapel, and flung himself back in a stall, the archbishop hovering over him with a smellingbottle; but in two minutes his curiosity got the better of his hypocrisy, and he ran about the chapel with his glass to spy who was or was not there, spying with one hand, and mopping his eyes with the other. Then returned the fear of catching cold; and the duke of Cumberland, who was sinking with heat, felt himself weighed down, and turning round, found it was the duke of Newcastle standing upon his train, to avoid the chill of the marble. It was very theatric to look down into the vault, where the coffin lay, attended by mourners with lights. Clavering, the groom of the bed-chamber, refused to sit up with the body, and was dismissed by the king's order.

I have nothing more to tell you, but a trifle, a very trifle. The king of Prussia has totally defeated marshal Daun. This, which would have been prodigious news a month ago, is nothing today; it only takes its turn among the questions, "Who is to be groom of the bedchamber? what is sir T. Robinson to have?" I have been to Leicester-fields today; the crowd was immoderate; I don't believe it will continue so. Good night.

Yours ever.

Remarks on Some Eighteenth-Century Words and Foreign Phrases

"making love"—This term, like some other period phrases, exists in modern speech, but has changed its meaning. It was not a synonym for "engaging in sexual relations," but was

strictly a male activity and meant any sort of amorous wooing behavior, including the writing or reading of romantic poetry to a young woman, giving her flowers, whispering sweet nothings in her ear, or going so far as kissing, cupping (breasts, we assume), toying (pretty openended), etc.—but certainly not including sexual intercourse.

"gagging" (e.g., "What had the gagging wee bitch been saying?")—This is a Scots word (not Gaelic), meaning "hoaxing," from which we might deduce an etymology that led to the present-day "gag," meaning a joke of some sort.

"imbranglement"—period colloquialism; an onomatopoetic word that means just what it sounds like: complicated and involuntary entanglement, whether physical, legal, or emotional.

whisky vs. whiskey—Scotch whisky is spelled without an "e" and Irish whiskey is spelled with an "e." Consequently, I've observed this geographical peculiarity, depending on the location where the substance is produced and/or being ingested.

pixilated—nowadays, you occasionally see this term (spelled as "pixelated") used to mean "rendered digitally, in pixels," or "of unusably low-resolution," in reference to a photographic image. It was used as a reference to stop-frame photographic technique even before the development of digital photography, and spelled as "pixilated" it was used as a synonym for drunkenness from the mid-nineteenth century. The original meaning, though, was very probably a literal reference to being "away with the pixies (fairies)"—i.e., delusional, and Jamie uses the word in this fashion.

Humpty-Dumpty—The first known *published* version of this nursery rhyme is from 1803, but there's considerable

evidence for the name and general concept—as well as, perhaps, earlier versions of the rhyme—existing prior to this. "Humpty dumpty" is a documented slang term from the eighteenth century, used to refer to a short, clumsy person, and while Tom Byrd doesn't use the name, he's obviously familiar with the concept.

Plan B—I had some concern from one editor and one betareader as to whether "Plan B" sounded anachronistic. I didn't think so, and explained my reasoning thus:

Dear Bill—

Well, I thought about that. On the one hand, there is "Plan 9 from Outer Space" and the like, which would certainly lead one to suppose "Plan B" is modern. And it certainly is common (modern) short-hand for any backup contingency.

On the other hand ... they certainly had plans (as used in Lord John's sense) in the 18th century—and presumably, a man with an orderly mind would have listed his plans either as 1, 2, 3, or A, B, C (if not I, II, III). WhatImeantersay is, it could reasonably be regarded as simple common-sense usage, rather than as a figure of speech—and IF so, it isn't anachronistic.

If you think it might trouble folk unduly, though, I can certainly reorder his lordship's language, if not his plans.

To which the editor luckily replied:

Dear Diana

That all makes perfect sense. In fact, the more I think about it, the more it sounds like the natural expression of an orderly 18th-century mind. So let's keep it.

Scots/Scottish/Scotch—As I've observed in the notes to other books, the word "Scotch," as used to refer to natives of Scotland, dropped out of favor in the mid-twentieth century, when the SNP started gaining power. Prior to that point in

history, though, it was commonly used by both Scots and non-Scots—certainly by English people. I don't hold with foisting anachronistic attitudes of political correctness onto historical persons, so have retained the common period usage.

"Yellow-johns" and "swarthy-johns" were both common Irish insults of the period used in reference to the English, God knows why (cf. *Ireland and the Jacobite Cause, 1685–1766: A Fatal Attachment,* by Éamonn Ó Ciardha).

Gàidhlig/Gaeilge

The Celtic tongue spoken in Ireland and Scotland was essentially the same language—called "Erse"—until about 1600, at which point local variations became more pronounced, followed by a big spelling shift that made the Gaelic of the Highlands (*Gàidhlig*) distinct from the Irish Gaelic (*Gaeilge*). The two languages still have much in common (rather like the relation between Spanish and Italian), but would have been recognizably different even in 1760.

Now, with reference to my own novels, I did know that Gaelic was the native tongue of the Scottish Highlands, when I began writing *Outlander*. Finding someone in Phoenix, Arizona (in 1988), who *spoke* Gaelic was something else. I finally found a bookseller (Steinhof's Foreign Books, in Boston) who could provide me with an English/Gaelic dictionary, and that's what I used as a source when writing *Outlander*.

When the book was sold and the publisher gave me a three-book contract, I said to my husband, "I think I really must *see* the place," and we went to Scotland. Here I found a much bigger and more sophisticated Gaelic/English dictionary, and that's what I used while writing *Dragonfly in*

Amber.

And then I met Iain. I got a wonderful letter from Iain MacKinnon Taylor, who said all kinds of delightful things regarding my books, and then said, "There is just this one small thing, which I hesitate to mention. I was born on the Isle of Harris and am a native Gaelic-speaker—and I think you must be getting your Gaelic from a dictionary." He then generously volunteered his time and talent to provide translations for the Gaelic in subsequent books, and the Gaelic in Voyager, Drums of Autumn, The Fiery Cross, The Outlandish Companion, and A Breath of Snow and Ashes is due to Iain's efforts, and those of his twin brother Hamish and other members of his family still residing on Harris.

At this point, Iain was no longer able to continue doing the translations, but I was extremely fortunate in that a friend, Catherine MacGregor, was not only a student of Gaelic herself but was also a friend of Catherine-Ann MacPhee, world-famous Gaelic singer, and a native speaker from Barra. The two Cathys very generously did the Gaelic for *The Exile* and *An Echo in the Bone*.

And then I rashly wrote a book that not only involved Scottish Gaelic *and* Irish, but actually employed the language as a plot element. Fortunately, Cathy and Cathy-Ann were more than equal to the challenge and dragooned their friend Kevin Dooley, musician, author, and fluent Irish speaker, to provide those bits as well.

One thing about Gaelic is that it doesn't look *anything* like it sounds—and so my ever-helpful Gaelic translators kindly offered to make a recording of themselves reading the bits of Gaelic dialogue in the book aloud, for those curious as to what it really sounds like. You can find this recording (and a phonetic pronunciation guide) on my website at www.DianaGabaldon.com, or on my Facebook page at www.facebook.com/AuthorDianaGabaldon.

Gaelic and Other Non-English Terms

Here, I've just listed brief common expressions that aren't explicitly translated in context.

Moran taing—thank you
Oidhche mhath—good night
Mo mhic—my son
Scheisse!—Shit! (German)

Carte blanche—literally "white card," used as an expression in picquet to note that one holds a hand with no points. In more general parlance, it means one has the freedom to do anything in a given situation, as no rules apply.

Sixième—Sixth
Septième—Seventh

To those selfless champions of a beautiful and beloved language who have so kindly helped me with Gaelic translations through the years:

Iain MacKinnon Taylor (and members of his family) (Gaelic/Gàidhlig): Voyager, Drums of Autumn, The Fiery Cross, and A Breath of Snow and Ashes

Catherine MacGregor and Catherine-Ann MacPhee (Gaelic/Gàidhlig): An Echo in the Bone,
The Exile, and The Scottish Prisoner

Kevin Dooley (Irish/Gaeilge): The Scottish Prisoner

Moran Taing!

Acknowledgments



To Jennifer Hershey and Bill Massey, my editors, who have so gracefully and skillfully handled the business of editing a book simultaneously from two different countries, companies, and points of view ...

To the delightful copy editor Kathy Lord, who knows how many esses there are in "nonplussed," and who repeatedly saves my bacon by knowing how old everybody is and how far it is from Point A to Point B, geography and chronology not being my strong points at all, at all …

Jessica Waters, editorial assistant, adept at juggling several huge wads of manuscript, requests for interviews, and miscellaneous snippets of this and that simultaneously ...

Virginia Norey (aka "the Book Goddess"), who designed the elegant volume you hold ...

Vincent La Scala, Maggie Hart, and the many, many hardworking and endlessly tolerant people in the production department at Random House ...

Catherine-Ann MacPhee, that glowing daughter of Barra, actress, TV presenter, traditional singer, teacher, and recording artist—whose wonderful Gaelic recordings can be found at www.Greentrax.com—and who provided the marvelously nuanced translations of Scottish Gaelic for this book ...

Kevin Dooley, fluent speaker of Irish, musician, storyteller, and author (see www.kevindooleyauthor.blogspot.com), for his lovely and thoughtful translations of the Irish Gaelic. Any loss of fadas (the little accent marks scattered over written Irish like ground black pepper) is the fault either of me or the unavoidable friction involved in typesetting, and we apologize if we inadvertently lost any, either way ...

Catherine MacGregor (aka "Amazingly Perceptive and Generous Reader"), both for assistance in procuring and recording the Gaelic translations, helpful commentary on the manuscript, and for Eyeball-Numbing Nitpickery ...

Barbara Schnell and Sarah Meral, for the German bits ...

Laura Bailey, for helpful information on gaiters and other items of eighteenth-century costume ...

Allene Edwards, for Advanced Typo-spotting and Nitpickery ...

Claudia Howard, Recorded Books producer, for her openmindedness and courtesy while going about the tricky business of getting the audiobook of *The Scottish Prisoner* on sale simultaneously with the print version ...

Malcolm Edwards and Orion Publishing, for their faith in and stout support of this book ...

My husband, Doug Watkins, for helpful information on horses, mules, harness, and small boys ...

Karen Henry, Czarina of Traffic and Aedile Curule of the Diana Gabaldon folder (in the Compuserve Books and Writers Forum), without whom I would have a lot more distraction and fewer words on paper, both for herding the bumblebees and for her detailed and helpful manuscript comments ...

Susan Butler, for invaluable logistical assistance, household and dog management, and encyclopedic knowledge on how to ship things most expeditiously from Point A to Point B ...

Jeremy Tolbert, Nikki Rowe, Michelle Moore, Loretta McKibben, and Janice Millford, for Web-based constructions and management ... I can't clone myself, but they're the next best thing ...

Lara, Suellen, Jari Backman, Wayne Sowry, and the dozens of other lovely people who've given me useful details and suggestions, or have remembered things for me that I had forgotten, but needed ...

Vicki Pack and The Society for the Appreciation of the English Awesomesauce (Lord John's fan club), for moral support and a great T-shirt ...

Elenna Loughlin, for the lovely author photo (taken in the eighteenth-century walled garden at Culloden House, near Inverness) ...

Judy Lowstuter, Judie Rousselle, and the Ladies of Lallybroch, for the bench in the eighteenth-century walled garden at Culloden House, kindly dedicated to me and my books ...

Allan Scott-Douglas, Ewen Dougan, and Louise Lewis for various Scots idioms, and for the correct spelling of "tattie"

Betsy ("Betty") Mitchell, Bedelia, Eldon Garlock, Karen Henry ("Keren-happuch"), and Guero the mule (aka "Whitey")—for the use of their names, though I hasten to add that with the exception of Guero, none of the above has anything in common with the characters bearing those names ...

Homer and JJ, for observations on dachshund puppies ...

and

Danny Baror and Russell Galen—better agents, no one's ever had.

Turn the page for a special early preview of

Written in My Own

Heart's Blood,

the next Outlander novel after

An Echo in the Bone.



Claire, having just discovered that Jamie is alive, meets Jamie's sister, the recently widowed Jenny Murray, in Philadelphia, in the wake of other traumatic discoveries ...

Mrs. Figg was smoothly spherical, gleamingly black, and inclined to glide silently up behind one like a menacing ballbearing.

"What's *this?*" she barked, manifesting herself suddenly behind Jenny.

"Holy Mother of God!" Jenny whirled, eyes round and hand pressed to her chest. "Who in God's name are you?"

"This is Mrs. Figg," I said, feeling a surreal urge to laugh, despite—or maybe because of—recent events. "Lord John Grey's cook. And Mrs. Figg, this is Mrs. Murray. My, um ... my ..."

"Your good-sister," Jenny said firmly. She raised one black eyebrow. "If ye'll have me, still?" Her look was straight and open, and the urge to laugh changed abruptly into an equally strong urge to burst into tears. Of all the unlikely sources of succor I could have imagined.... I took a deep breath and put out my hand.

"I'll have you."

Her small firm fingers wove through mine, and as simply as that, it was done. No need for apologies or spoken forgiveness. She'd never had to wear the mask that Jamie did. What she thought and felt was there in her eyes, those slanted blue cat-eyes she shared with her brother. She knew me, now, for what I was—and knew I loved—had always loved—her brother with all my heart and soul—despite the minor complications of being presently married to someone

else. And that knowledge obliterated years of mistrust, suspicion, and injury.

She heaved a sigh, eyes closing for an instant, then opened them and smiled at me, mouth trembling only a little.

"Well, fine and dandy," said Mrs. Figg, shortly. She narrowed her eyes and rotated smoothly on her axis, taking in the panorama of destruction. The railing at the top of the stair had been ripped off, and cracked banisters, dented walls, and bloody smudges marked the path of William's descent. Shattered crystals from the chandelier littered the floor, glinting festively in the light that poured through the open front door, the door itself hanging drunkenly from one hinge.

"Merde on toast," Mrs. Figg murmured. She turned abruptly to me, her small black-currant eyes still narrowed. "Where's his lordship?"

"Ah," I said. This was going to be rather sticky, I saw. While deeply disapproving of most people, Mrs. Figg was devoted to John. She wasn't going to be at all pleased to hear that he'd been abducted by—

"For that matter, where's my brother?" Jenny inquired, glancing round as though expecting Jamie to appear suddenly out from under the settee.

"Oh," I said. "Hm. Well ..." Possibly worse than sticky. Because ...

"And where's my Sweet William?" Mrs. Figg demanded, sniffing the air. "He's been here; I smell that stinky cologne he puts on his linen." She nudged a dislodged chunk of plaster disapprovingly with the toe of her shoe.

I took another long, deep breath, and a tight grip on what remained of my sanity.

"Mrs. Figg," I said, "perhaps you would be so kind as to make us all a cup of tea?"



Having just discovered Jamie Fraser is his true father, William leaves Lord John's house in a whirlwind of shock and rage ...

William Ransom, ninth Earl of Ellesmere, Viscount Ashness, shoved his way through the crowds on Broad Street, oblivious to the complaints of those rebounding from his impact.

He didn't know where he was going, or what he might do when he got there. All he knew was that he'd burst if he stood still.

His head throbbed like an inflamed boil. Everything throbbed. His hand—he'd probably broken something, but he didn't care. His heart, pounding and sore inside his chest. His foot, for God's sake, what, had he kicked something? He lashed out viciously at a loose cobblestone and sent it rocketing through a crowd of geese, who set up a huge cackle and lunged at him, hissing and beating at his shins with their wings.

Feathers and goose shit flew wide, and the crowd scattered in all directions.

"Bastard!" shrieked the goose-girl, and struck at him with her crook, catching him a shrewd thump on the ear. "Devil take you, *Schmutziger Bastard*!"

This sentiment was echoed by a number of other angry voices, and he veered into an alley, pursued by shouts and honks of agitation.

He rubbed his throbbing ear, lurching into buildings as he passed, oblivious to everything but the one word throbbing ever louder in his head. *Bastard*.

"Bastard!" he said out loud, and shouted, "Bastard, bastard!!" at the top of his lungs, hammering at the brick wall next to him with a clenched fist.

"Who's a bastard?" said a curious voice behind him. He swung round to see a young woman looking at him with

some interest. Her eyes moved slowly down his frame, taking note of the heaving chest, the bloodstains on the facings of his uniform coat and green smears of goose shit on his breeches, reached his silver buckled shoes, and returned to his face with more interest.

"I am," he said, hoarse and bitter.

"Oh, really?" She left the shelter of the doorway in which she'd been standing, and came across the alley to stand right in front of him. She was tall and slim, and had a very fine pair of high young breasts—which were clearly visible under the thin muslin of her shift, because while she had a silk petticoat, she wore neither stays nor bodice. No cap, either—her hair fell loose over her shoulders. A whore.

"I'm partial to bastards, myself," she said, and touched him lightly on the arm. "What kind of bastard are you? A wicked one? An evil one?"

"A sorry one," he said, and scowled when she laughed. She saw the scowl, but didn't pull back.

"Come in," she said, and took his hand. "You look as though you could do with a drink." He saw her glance at his knuckles, burst and bleeding, and she caught her lower lip behind small white teeth. She didn't seem afraid, though, and he found himself drawn unprotesting into the shadowed doorway after her.

What did it matter? he thought, with a sudden savage weariness. What did anything matter?



It wasn't yet midday, and the only voices in the house were the distant chitter of women. No one was visible in the parlor as they passed, and no one appeared as she led him up a foot-marked staircase to her room. It gave him an odd feeling, as though he might be invisible. He found the notion a comfort; he couldn't bear himself. She went in before him and threw open the shutters. He wanted to tell her to close them; he felt wretchedly exposed in the flood of sunlight. But it was summer; the room was hot and airless, and he was already sweating heavily. Air swirled in, heavy with the odor of tree sap, and the sun glowed briefly on the smooth top of her head, like the gloss on a fresh conker. She turned and smiled at him.

"First things first," she announced briskly. "Throw off your coat and waistcoat before you suffocate." Not waiting to see whether he would take this suggestion, she turned to reach for the basin and ewer. She filled the basin and stepped back, motioning him toward the wash-stand, where a towel and a much-used sliver of soap stood on worn wood.

"I'll fetch us a drink, shall I?" And with that, she was gone, bare feet pattering busily down the stairs.

Mechanically, he began to undress. He blinked stupidly at the basin, but then recalled that in the better sort of house, sometimes a man was required to wash his parts first. He'd encountered the custom once before, but on that occasion, the whore had performed the ablution for him—plying the soap to such effect that the first encounter had ended right there in the washbasin.

The memory made the blood flame up in his face again, and he ripped at his flies, popping off a button. He was still throbbing all over, but the sensation was becoming more centralized.

His hands were unsteady, and he cursed under his breath, reminded by the broken skin on his knuckles of his unceremonious exit from his father's—no, *not* his bloody father's house. Lord John's.

"You bloody *bastard*!" he said under his breath. "You knew, you knew all along!" That infuriated him almost more than the horrifying revelation of his own paternity—that his stepfather, whom he'd loved, whom he'd trusted more than anyone on earth—that Lord John bloody Grey had lied to

him his whole life!

Everyone had lied to him.

Everyone.

He felt suddenly as though he'd broken through a crust of frozen snow and plunged straight down into an unsuspected river beneath. Swept away into black breathlessness beneath the ice, helpless, voiceless, a feral chill clawing at his heart.

There was a small sound behind him and he whirled by instinct, aware only when he saw the young whore's appalled face that he was weeping savagely, tears running down his own face, and his wet, half-hard cock flopping out of his breeches.

"Go away," he croaked, making a frantic effort to tuck himself away.

She didn't go away, but came toward him, decanter in one hand and a pair of pewter cups in the other.

"Are you all right?" she asked, eyeing him sideways. "Here, let me pour you a drink. You can tell me all about it." "No!"

She came on toward him, but more slowly. Through his swimming eyes he saw the twitch of her mouth as she saw his cock.

"I meant the water for your poor hands," she said, clearly trying not to laugh. "I will say as you're a real gentleman, though."

"I'm not!"

She blinked.

"Is it an insult to call you a gentleman?"

Overcome with fury at the word, he lashed out blindly, knocking the decanter from her hand. It burst in a spray of glass and cheap wine, and she cried out as the red soaked through her petticoat.

"You bastard!" she shrieked, and drawing back her arm, threw the cups at his head. She didn't hit him, and they clanged and rolled away across the floor. She was turning

toward the door, crying out, "Ned! Ned!" when he lunged and caught her.

He only wanted to stop her shrieking, stop her bringing up whatever male enforcement the house employed. He got a hand on her mouth, yanking her back from the door, grappling one-handed to try to control her flailing arms.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" he kept saying. "I didn't mean—I don't mean—oh, bloody hell!" She caught him abruptly in the nose with her elbow and he dropped her, backing away with a hand to his face, blood dripping through his fingers.

Her face was marked with red where he'd held her, and her eyes were wild. She backed away, scrubbing at her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Get ... out!" she gasped.

He didn't need telling twice. He rushed past her, shouldered his way past a burly man charging up the stairs, and ran down the alley, realizing only when he reached the street that he was in his shirtsleeves, having left coat and waistcoat behind, and his breeches were undone.

"Ellesmere!" said an appalled voice nearby. He looked up in horror, to find himself the cynosure of several English officers, including Alexander Lindsay, Earl Balcarres.

"Good Christ, Ellesmere, what happened?" Sandy was by way of being a friend, and was already pulling a voluminous, snowy handkerchief from his sleeve. He clapped this to William's nose, pinching his nostrils and insisting that he put his head back.

"Have you been set upon and robbed?" one of the others demanded. "God! This filthy place!"

He felt at once comforted by their company—and hideously embarrassed by it. He was not one of them; not any longer.

"Was it? Was it robbery?" another said, glaring round eagerly. "We'll find the bastards who did it, 'pon my honor we will! We'll get your property back and teach whoever did it a lesson!"

Blood was running down the back of his throat, harsh and iron-tasting, and he coughed, but did his best to nod and shrug simultaneously. He *had* been robbed. But no one was ever going to give him back what he'd lost today.



Meanwhile, outside Philadelphia, Lord John and Jamie continue an Interesting Conversation ...

He'd been quite resigned to dying; had expected it from the moment that he'd blurted out, "I have had carnal knowledge of your wife." The only question in his mind had been whether Fraser would shoot him, stab him, or eviscerate him with his bare hands.

To have the injured husband regard him calmly and say merely, "Oh? Why?" was not merely unexpected, but ... infamous. Absolutely infamous.

"Why?" John Grey repeated, incredulous. "Did you say 'why'?"

"I did. And I should appreciate an answer."

Now that Grey had both eyes open, he could see that Fraser's outward calm was not quite so impervious as he'd first supposed. There was a pulse beating in Fraser's temple, and he'd shifted his weight a little, like a man might do in the vicinity of a tavern brawl, not quite ready to commit violence, but readying himself to meet it. Perversely, Grey found this sight steadying.

"What do you bloody *mean*, 'why'?" he said, suddenly irritated. "And why aren't you fucking dead?"

"I often wonder that myself," Fraser replied politely. "I take it ye thought I was?"

"Yes, and so did your wife! Do you have the faintest idea what the knowledge of your death *did* to her?"

The dark blue eyes narrowed just a trifle.

"Are ye implying that the news of my death deranged her to such an extent that she lost her reason and took ye to her bed by force? Because," he went on, neatly cutting off Grey's heated reply, "unless I've been seriously misled regarding your own nature, it would take substantial force to compel ye to any such action. Or am I wrong?"

The eyes stayed narrow. Grey stared back at them. Then he closed his own eyes briefly and rubbed both hands hard over his face, like a man waking from a nightmare. He dropped his hands and opened his eyes again.

"You are not misled," he said through clenched teeth. "And you *are* wrong."

Fraser's ruddy eyebrows shot up—in genuine astonishment, he thought.

"Ye went to her because—from *desire*?" His voice rose, too. "And she let ye? I dinna believe it."

The color was creeping up Fraser's tanned neck, vivid as a climbing rose. Grey had seen that happen before, and decided recklessly that the best—the only—defense was to lose his own temper first. It was a relief.

"We thought you were *dead*, you bloody arsehole!" he said, furious. "Both of us! Dead! And we—we—took too much to drink one night—very much too much ... we spoke of you ... and ... Damn you, neither one of us was making love to the other—we were fucking *you!*"

Fraser's face went abruptly blank and his jaw dropped. Grey enjoyed one split-second of satisfaction at the sight, before a massive fist came up hard beneath his ribs and he hurtled backward, staggered a few steps further, and fell. He lay in the leaves, completely winded, mouth opening and closing like an automaton's.

All right, then, he thought dimly. Bare hands it is.

The hands wrapped themselves in his shirt and jerked him to his feet. He managed to stand, and a wisp of air seeped into his lungs. Fraser's face was an inch from his. Fraser was in fact so close that he couldn't see the man's expression—only a close-up view of two bloodshot blue eyes, both of them berserk. That was enough. He felt quite calm now. It wouldn't take long.

"You tell me exactly what happened, ye filthy wee pervert," Fraser whispered, his breath hot on Grey's face and smelling of ale. He shook Grey slightly. "Every word. Every motion. *Everything*."

Grey got just enough breath to answer.

"No," he said definitely. "Go ahead and kill me."



Kidnapped and imprisoned in a hydroelectric maintenance tunnel under a dam, Jem rides the workers' train toward whatever awaits him in the dark ...

He must be getting near the end of the tunnel. Jem could tell by the way the air pushed back against his face. All he could see was the little red light on the train's dashboard—did you call it a dashboard on a train? he wondered. He didn't want to stop, because that meant he'd have to get out of the train, into the dark. But the train was running out of track, so there wasn't much else he could do.

He pulled back a little bit on the lever that made the train go, and it slowed down. More. Just a little more, and the lever clicked into a kind of slot and the train stopped with a little jerk that made him stumble and grab the edge of the cab.

An electric train didn't make any engine noise, but the wheels rattled on the track and the train made squeaks and clunks as it moved. When it stopped, the noise stopped too. It was really quiet.

"Hey!" he said out loud, because he didn't want to listen to

his heart beating. The sound echoed, and he looked up, startled. Mum had said the tunnel was really high, more than thirty feet, but he'd forgot that. The idea that there was a lot of empty space hanging over him that he couldn't see bothered him a lot. He swallowed, and stepped out of the tiny engine, holding on to the frame with one hand.

"Hey!" he shouted at the invisible ceiling. "Are there any bats up there?"

Silence. He'd kind of been hoping there *were* bats. He wasn't afraid of them—there were bats in the old broch, and he liked to sit and watch them come out to hunt in the summer evenings. But he was alone. Except for the dark.

His hands were sweating. He let go of the metal cab and scrubbed both hands on his jeans. Now he could hear himself breathing, too.

"Crap," he whispered under his breath. That made him feel better, so he said it again. Maybe he ought to be praying instead, but he didn't feel like that, not yet.

There was a door, Mum said. At the end of the tunnel. It led into the service chamber, where the big turbines could be lifted up from the dam if they needed fixing. Would the door be locked?

Suddenly he realized that he'd stepped away from the train and he didn't know whether he was facing the end of the tunnel or back the way he'd come. In a panic, he blundered to and fro, hands out, looking for the train. He tripped over part of the track and fell sprawling. He lay there for a second saying, "Crap-crap-crap-crap-crap!" because he'd skinned both knees and the palm of his hand, but he was OK, really, and now he knew where the track was, so he could follow it and not get lost.

He got up, wiped his nose, and shuffled slowly along, kicking the track every few steps to be sure he stayed with it. He thought he was in front of where the train had stopped, so it didn't really matter which way he was going—either

he'd find the train or he'd find the end of the tunnel. And then the door. If it was locked, maybe—

Something like an electric shock ran right through him. He gasped and fell over backward. The only thing in his mind was the idea that somebody had hit him with a light saber like Luke Skywalker's, and for a minute, he thought maybe whoever it was had cut off his head.

He couldn't feel his body, and could see in his mind his body lying bleeding in the dark and his head sitting right there on the train tracks in the dark, not being able to see his body and not even knowing it wasn't attached anymore. He made a breathless kind of a noise that was trying to be a scream, but it made his stomach move and he felt that, he *felt* it, and suddenly he felt a lot more like praying.

"Gratia ... Deo!" he managed to gasp. It was what Grandda said when he talked about a fight or killing something and this wasn't quite that sort of thing, but it seemed like a good thing to say anyway.

Now he could feel all of himself again, but he sat up and grabbed his neck, just to be sure his head was still on. His skin was jumping in the weirdest way. Like a horse's does when a horse-fly bites it, but all over. He swallowed and tasted sugared silver and he gasped again, because now he knew what had hit him. Sort of.

This wasn't quite like it had been, when they'd all walked into the rocks on Ocracoke. One minute, he'd been in his father's arms and the next minute it was like he was scattered everywhere in little wiggly pieces like the spilled quicksilver in Grannie's surgery. Then he was back together again and Da was still holding him tight enough to squeeze his breath out, and he could hear Da sobbing and that scared him and he had a funny taste in his mouth and little pieces of him were still wiggling around trying to get away but they were trapped inside his skin....

Yeah. That was what was making his skin jump now, and

he breathed easier, knowing what it was. That was OK, then, he was OK, it would stop.

It was stopping already, the twitchy feeling going away. He still felt a little shaky, but he stood up. Careful, because he didn't know where it was.

Wait ... he did know. He knew exactly.

"That's weird," he said out loud without really noticing, because he wasn't scared by the dark anymore, it wasn't important.

He couldn't really *see* it, not with his eyes, not exactly. He squinted, trying to think how he *was* seeing it, but there wasn't a word for what he was doing. Kind of like hearing or smelling or touching, but not really any of those.

But he knew where it was. It was right *there*, a kind of ... shiver ... in the air, and when he stared at it, he had a feeling in the back of his mind like really pretty sparkly things, like sun on the sea and the way a candle flame looked when it shone through a ruby, but he knew he wasn't really *seeing* anything like that.

It went all the way across the tunnel, and up to the high roof, too, he could tell. But it wasn't thick at all, it was thin as air.

He guessed that was why it hadn't swallowed him like the thing in the rocks on Ocracoke had. At least ... he thought it hadn't, and for an instant, worried that maybe he'd gone sometime else. But he didn't think so. The tunnel felt just the same, and so did he, now his skin had stopped jumping. When they'd done it, on Ocracoke, he'd known right away it was different.

He stood there for a minute, just looking and thinking, and then shook his head and turned around, feeling with his foot for the track. He wasn't going back through *that*, no matter what. He'd just have to hope the door wasn't locked.

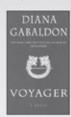


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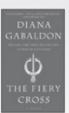
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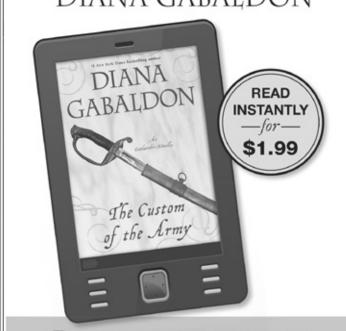
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The Custom of the Army

An Outlander Novella

By #1 New York Times bestselling author DIANA GABALDON



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By Diana Gabaldon



(in chronological order)

Outlander

Dragonfly in Amber

Voyager

Drums of Autumn

The Fiery Cross

A Breath of Snow and Ashes

An Echo in the Bone

The Outlandish Companion (nonfiction)

(in chronological order)

Lord John and the Hellfire Club (novella)

Lord John and the Private Matter

Lord John and the Succubus (novella)

Lord John and the Brotherhood of the Blade

Lord John and the Haunted Soldier (novella)

Custom of the Army (novella)

Lord John and the Hand of Devils (collected novellas)

The Scottish Prisoner

Plague of Zombies (novella)

About the Author



Diana Gabaldon is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the wildly popular Outlander novels—*Outlander, Dragonfly in Amber, Voyager, Drums of Autumn, The Fiery Cross, A Breath of Snow and Ashes* (for which she won a Quill Award and the Corine International Book Prize), and *An Echo in the Bone*—as well as one work of nonfiction, *The Outlandish Companion;* the Outlander graphic novel *The Exile;* and the bestselling series featuring Lord John Grey, a character she introduced in her Outlander series. She lives in Scottsdale, Arizona, with her husband.

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